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講談社文庫

Empty Boundaries Volume I

The Garden of Sibbers

by Kiyoko Nasu (奈須 きのこ)

STORIES BY KINOKO NASU

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上
俯瞰風景

Part I: Panorama

Chanatos.



That was the day when, led on by nothing except an impulse of curiosity, I took the main avenue on the way home. It wasn't a shortcut, and I didn't plan on passing by any particular place there. It was just something I decided to do on a whim.

This part of the avenue was full of skyscrapers and tall condos, some old, more of them new, while others were abandoned husks, all commingled into one crowded skyline. I'd wager everybody in the city, including me, was tired of looking at them day in and day out. While walking beside the buildings, I suddenly saw something fall from a roof to the concrete sidewalk some distance ahead of me.

It was a person.

In the moment that that person fell, I heard a sickening sound. The wet, raw sound you associate with the kind of things you don't want happening anywhere near you. The kind of sound you never really get to hear often. Judging from the height that the person fell from, it was clear that whoever he or she was died the instant it hit the pavement.

As I drew closer to the point of impact, I was able to scrutinize what happened more clearly. All that was left, all that my mind could take in, was the scarlet trail seeping slowly across the asphalt; the frail, bone-like limbs, and the long, black hair, which still retained some of its living beauty.

And that dead face.

The scene struck my mind with the image of a flower pressed between the pages of an old, musty tome.

Perhaps because the corpse, with its neck twisted, looked like a broken lily to me.

It is a night somewhere in the beginning of August, and Mikiya comes by to visit without any prior notice, as per his MO. Popping open the door, I see him standing idly in the hallway, facing the entrance like some sort of servant-in-waiting.

"Evening, Shiki. You look as lazy as ever," he says, with a smile on his face. A strange greeting is just the kind of thing I expected him to do.

"Have you heard?" he continues. "There was another jumper today, actually. This time I was actually at the scene. There've been a lot of these incidents lately, but I never thought I would actually come across one." He hands me a plastic convenience store bag. "Here, in the fridge." He holds the bag, arm outstretched, while untying his shoes and talking to me. Mikiya is nothing if not a multi-tasker. Inside the bag were two cups of Haagen-Dazs strawberry ice cream. I guess he wants me to put them inside my fridge before they melt. While checking out the contents of the bag, Mikiya had already undone his laces and stepped inside.

My home is just a small apartment in a low-rise. The first thing you see on opening the front door is the small entryway, not even one meter long, where you take off your shoes. After going through that mess, you arrive at my one-stop bedroom-slash-living room, where Mikiya had already started making himself comfortable. I follow him in, glaring at his back while doing so.

"Shiki, you've been skipping class again, haven't you? Your grades don't really matter, but come on; you should at least attend your classes. Don't tell me you already forgot our promise to go to college together."

"Wiser words were never before spoken," I reply, feeling particularly caustic, "especially coming from someone who dropped college way before I did. And sadly, this promise we supposedly made ain't ringing any bells."

"Don't start being difficult again, Shiki."

Mikiya tends to be a bit more blunt when you've got him cornered in a conversation; a helpful tidbit that has only recently come back to me. I climb on top of the bed and lie flat, Mikiya choosing to sit on the floor while leaning on the bed, his back facing me.

This young man named Mikiya Kokutō has been a friend to me since high school. At least that's what my head tells me. My recollections have been a bit fuzzy lately.

We live in an age where fashion trends and the accompanying models that people want to look like are as apt to change as often as you blink in a

day. A rarity, then, to still find someone like Mikiya, who steadfastly refuses to budge from his student-like appearance. He doesn't dye his hair or have it grow into an unmanageable mess, he doesn't tan his skin or wear accessories, he doesn't carry a cellphone, and he doesn't even allow himself the simple pleasures of flirting around with women. His demeanor struck me as the kind of person you'd probably see more ordinarily at lazy English train stations. His 170cm height, considerate disposition, and large, black rimmed glasses certainly complete the image. Not exactly someone you do a double-take on when you pass him by on the street, though it mostly due to his own fault: if he actually took the time to dress nicely instead of wearing somber black clothes every day, he might even be noticed.

"Shiki, are you listening? I met your mom today, too. She said you haven't really contacted your family since you got out of the hospital two months ago. You should at least show your face at the Ryōgi estate, don't you think?"

"Mmm?" I reply, as listlessly as Kokutō said I was. "I don't really have any business being there, though."

"Oh, come on, isn't it about time you patched things up with your folks? It's been two years after all, and you haven't talked or met with them since."

"There's no use in making a pointless house call or a pointless conversation with them when it'll only make us grow farther apart. It still isn't real to me. Not so soon after getting out of the hospital. I mean, talking to you is still weird; what'll happen if I talk to those strangers?" My patience with the subject grew thinner every second. I wish he would just stop pushing it.

"Things aren't going to get any better if it keeps up like this, you know. It isn't right for you and your parents to be living so close to each other and not even talk."

The sudden criticism makes me frown. What exactly is wrong with it? There's nothing illegal going on between me and my parents. It's just that I lost some of my memories in a traffic accident. We're recognized as a family by the law and by our blood, so there really shouldn't be anything to talk about here.

Mikiya always has his head in a worry about any damn person and their life issues, even though to me it seems like a wasteful exercise.

Panorama ~ I

Shiki Ryōgi is my friend from high school. We studied together in a private school famous for putting a lot of its students on the fast track to a college education. On the day that I was looking for my name on the lists of people who had passed the entrance exam, I saw a name that caught my eye: "Shiki Ryōgi." As names go, it was a pretty peculiar one, and our being classmates ensured that it would get stuck in my head. Ever since then, I've become possibly the only friend Shiki's ever had.

Due to our school having no uniforms, and a casual clothing policy, a lot of people dressed in a multitude of ways to express themselves. Even in that sort of environment, Shiki stood out from the crowd.

Largely because of the kimono.

At first, that particular wardrobe choice made it seem as if the prime minister himself walked in on the classroom, forcing everyone to silence. But once it became clear that Shiki wasn't sparing any words for anyone except the queries of the teachers, which were uncommon, people started to stop caring. Not that Shiki minded.

The cultivated air of inapproachability, intentional or not, certainly widened the distance more than the clothes already did, but Shiki's features undoubtedly helped out in that regard as well.

Black hair framed Shiki's face, as it does now; cut long enough to hide the ears. However, it was clear that the maintenance of it seemed to Shiki like it was time wasted, evidenced by how it looked like it was cut with reckless abandon. Yet the cut was just at that height where people start to second guess Shiki's gender on first contact. More than anything though, it would be Shiki's eyes that lend your feet to stop. Those eyes carried a piercing gaze, seeming to bear witness to something invisible, something "other". To me, those eyes were a definition, synecdochic to character.

But then, the accident happened...

I 2

"The jumpers."

"Wha—oh, sorry, I wasn't listening." Mikiya cocks his head towards me a bit to listen.

"I said 'the jumpers.' As in the people who took a header on the sidewalk off a building. Would you say that what happened was accidental, Mikiya?"

He shuts up for a moment and actually tries to think on the casual question seriously. He puts a hand on his chin, evoking the puzzled intensity of stumped detectives the world over.

"Well, it's on the person who jumps if he really wanted to do that or not. As for how society will look at it, they do classify 'falling from a high place' as an accident so—"

"Not a murder, not exactly a suicide, and not exactly an accident either. That's vague," I muse. "I don't know if it occurred to them that killing themselves would just inconvenience a lot more people than they thought it would. Maybe they should have grabbed a handbook on the subject and died a bit better." As soon as I say that, I see Mikiya shake his head in disapproval.

"I guess I have to add 'speaks ill of the departed' to your already illustrious résumé of insensitivity." He replies in monotone disappointment, almost without a note of chastisement. Typical.

"Ah, Kokutō. Ever the killjoy." Despite my objection, he doesn't even seem to care.

"Hah, that's rare. It's been a while since you called me by that name."

"That so?"

He nods like a squirrel. I tend to pronounce his surname a bit differently than you would normally, with a sort of French flavor; a small joke that originates way back in high school. I don't really like the ring of the nickname though, so I stick with "Mikiya" for the most part, but sometimes I just blurt it out, like an involuntary emission of boredom or frustration. In the silence of my reverie, he suddenly claps his hands as if remembering something.

"Oh yeah, while we're on the topic of rare things, I just remembered that my sister Azaka said she saw it too."

"Saw what now?"

"The girl you said you saw floating around the Fujō Tower."

Ah, yes, the Fujō Tower, former high-rise condominium situated in the commercial office district of town that used to serve as residence to the

more privileged tax brackets, now abandoned and leaving people with little else save its husk and its memory. And a haunting, if what Kokutō says is true. Passing by it some days ago, I happened to see a spectral figure in that looked quite human. If Azaka saw it too, then it must mean it's real.

My second sight, the ability to see these types of events, has its roots (as much as one can point out a definitive origin to this weirdness, at least) in one event, a point in time that feels simultaneously distant and recent. I was in a traffic accident two years ago, and because of that I spent those last two years in a coma. After waking from that coma, I began to...see things that weren't there before. Tōko would say that what I'm doing isn't so much "sight" as it is "perception." In other words, it seems my senses have "awakened" to a higher level of perception, but it's all technical magical gobbledegook that I couldn't care less to understand.

"I did see it more than a few times, but I haven't been there lately so I wouldn't know if it's still there," I say, as I stretch out my arms.

"I don't know why," says Kokutō, perplexed, "but I pass by there all the time and I don't see anything."

"I'd say it's because you have one extra pair of eyes too many," I throw back at him.

"Erm, I don't think glasses have anything to do with it." Mikiya is always like this. He's on a no-nonsense path and he's going to stick to it come hell or high water. Honestly, I think it's his naiveté that makes him not see these..."other" things. Nevertheless, these trifling incidents of people flying and falling seem to be set to continue. I can't puzzle out the meaning behind it all, so I ask Mikiya a question.

"Mikiya, do you know the reason people fly?"

He gives a shrug. "Wouldn't know. I mean, I've never tried flying before anyway," he says with a yawn.

I 8

It is a night approaching the end of August, and I decide to take a stroll. Despite summer quickly coming to a close, the air usually remained warm, which makes the chill running through the air tonight a rare and unusual event. The last train has come and gone, and a deathly silence has blanketed the city. This dead part of town is largely bereft of people, and looked like something foreign. Even the few pedestrians present seem fake, unnatural, like they were from some old daguerreotype. The whole thing reminds me of the scent of corpses, of grave pallor that stretched its damning influence across the city, as unstoppable and incurable as a terminal disease.

Everything—from the foreboding houses with no signs of life or light, to the dimly lit convenience store that offers little respite from the darkness—everything feels like all it takes is one bad moment to make them all fall down in violent upheaval.

The moon seems like the last refuge of life, even as my eyes take in the richness of death in all things. This place is no exception, and my eyes hurt because of it. It's sickening.

I took a black leather jacket with me when I left the house, and now I wear it atop my light blue kimono. The kimono's sleeves get bunched up inside the jacket, and the heat warms my body. Even then, it still isn't hot.

Well, not exactly. For me, it's more like it wasn't cold to begin with.

Even in such a deep night like this one, you can still encounter a few people making their way on the streets.

A man with the complete suit-tie-briefcase ensemble hurriedly making his way down the lane, his face cast downwards, features hidden by the shadows. A loiterer sitting by the light of the vending machine, his head swimming in the potent cocktail of alcohol and narcotics. Vagrants hanging around the vicinity of the 24-hour convenience store, maybe pondering how exactly they're going to bust it, or just trying to find safety in numbers.

Who knows what reason these people may find themselves out here in the middle of the night, walking dangerous streets? I don't even know my own reasons. I'm just doing what I used to do before.

...Two years ago.

In a different time, I was on the cusp of going into my second year of high school. But in that rain-soaked night, I was involved in an unfortunate

traffic accident. I was brought to the hospital straightaway. Apparently, I didn't receive much in the way of bodily harm; few wounds, nothing serious, but nothing much beyond that. If it was really an accident, it was a pretty damn clean one, I'd say. On the other hand, peculiarly, I did receive serious damage to my brain, through which I lapsed into a deep coma. That's what they told me at least. That night is the only time I have trouble even recalling.

Because I had little serious physical injury, it wasn't a big stretch for the hospital to keep me alive, and my unconscious self grasped and groped for that last sliver of life. Statistically speaking, after 6 months, the chances of a coma patient coming back are pretty slim, but there are the aberrant cases, like myself. The doctors were so surprised at my recovery two months ago; it's as if they saw a corpse rising from the grave. Guess they never expected me to pull a Lazarus on them, which I guess clues me in to their close to zilch hopes on my case. Though perhaps not equaling their exaggerated reactions, I too had a surprise waiting for me.

My memories became...alien, foreign, like they were coming from the head of a different person. Put simply, I'm dissociated from the memories, unable to put stock in their validity. It was different than mere amnesia, or a lapse in memory.

As Tōko would say, there are apparently four systems or steps the brain uses with regards to handling memory: encoding, storage, retrieval, and recognition.

“Encoding” is writing your impressions of an experience as information in your brain.

“Storage” is actually keeping that impression or memory.

“Retrieval” is calling back that stored information, or in other words, remembering.

“Recognition” is confirming whether or not that information was the same as what actually happened.

If, in any one of these steps, there is some sort of failure, then you get memory disorder. Depending on which of these steps fail, you get very different cases of memory disorder. In my case, however, there isn't a problem with any of these steps. Though I can't place my memories as my own, “recognition” is working because I can identify my memories as my previous experiences.

Even then, I still couldn't trust these memories. I had no real feeling that I am the Shiki Ryōgi that was. Perhaps it was some other Shiki Ryōgi, some other high school student, some other person who had an accident. But I've seen the documents; I *am* Shiki Ryōgi. At least that's what my brain

tells me

Two years of oblivion have reduced me, if not to emptiness, than to something that sits closely beside it. It laid waste all that I was inside, and severed what connection existed between my memory and personality through two years of “living” like a shell, on the boundary of emptiness. And though there was precious little drama here compared to actual societal rejection, it drives me to worry all the same. All my memories are just reflections on the water, and I don’t know whether I’m the reflection or the real thing. With these memories, I know how to act like the Shiki Ryōgi that my parents and friends knew, but I know it best; it’s all just an act, just mimesis. It’s like being a newborn baby: not knowing anything and lacking any sort of world experience. Or possibly it’s more like not living at all.

Still, the memories do help. I mean, they make me into a functional human being, after all. I already have the emotions people have from experiencing something. It’s not real, hands-on experience or anything, but at least it’s there. It results in this weird feeling where if I do something, I feel like it’s my first time doing it and also feel like I’ve done it a hundred times before. There’s no amazement, like a magic trick where you can see the strings in the sleeve.

And so I continue to play out this strange role. The reason is quite simple. Because by doing so, maybe I can return to some semblance of the past.

Because by doing so, maybe I can figure out why I like walking so late at night.

I guess, in a way, you could say I’ve fallen in love with my previous self.

I try to get my bearings in the neighborhood, and I realize I’ve walked pretty far, enough to reach the office district of the city. Buildings that stood at heights almost similar to each other lined the street, looking like soldiers arranged in neat little firing ranks. The surface of these buildings are riddled with little glass windows, themselves in their own arrangement. The reflection of moonlight as well as of the other buildings borne atop their shining surfaces creates a sort of shadow world, where monsters and their kind lurked.

One shadow stands taller than the rest, however. Like a perverse monument, it stands long and narrow, with a height that looked like it could reach the moon.

The Fujō Tower.

No lights or signs of life are present in that building. Seeing as how it’s two o’ clock in the morning, I really shouldn’t be surprised. The coldness

of the still night is irregular at this time of summer. The bone in my nape creaks from the cold, despite the lack of any tangible feeling of a breeze. I decide that it's just my imagination. As I looked up at the towering structure, a black shape flits past my sight, almost unnoticeable because of the lack of light. Looking closer, I realize it's a shadow of a human figure, and then I realize it's not a shadow at all. The silhouette of a woman comes floating into view atop the building. I didn't mean that as a turn of phrase though. She literally is floating.

"Hmph, so you've shown yourself today as well, I see." I say.

I don't like her up there, silhouetted against the moonlight. But I can hardly do anything about what I can see. And as quickly as I saw her, she vanishes, flying as if the moon was her cradle.

Panorama - II

I see a dragonfly, beating its wings.

A butterfly follows it, but its pace doesn't slacken. The butterfly tries to keep up with the dragonfly, but it is a futile effort. As it flies further, I see a glimpse of the butterfly as its strength failed and gravity took hold. It makes an arc as it falls, and then trails its way to the ground like a snake, or a broken lily. A sad and cruel scene.

Perhaps, even if they could not travel together, they could have kept each other company for a while longer. But I knew that was impossible. To something like the dragonfly, whose feet don't touch the earth, even such freedom was denied.

I hear the distinct buzz of conversation, and I wake up.

My eyelids were screaming for two more hours of sleep, even as my mind warred between sleeping and waking. In the end, the battle was won by the latter, and I set to work on the laborious task of opening my eyelids. Sometimes, I wonder if I worry about these things too much. I was up all night working on the blueprints and diagrams, and I must have fallen asleep in Miss Tōko's room. I raise myself up from the sofa with a hint of enthusiasm, pushing up my glasses so I could see better, and I realize that this was indeed the office.

The office was a cluttered place full of occult oddities and research that Miss Tōko had accumulated throughout the years. The midday sunlight illuminated this mess, as well as the two people conversing; Shiki, wearing a smooth kimono as always, was leaning with back to the wall, and Miss Tōko was sitting cross-legged on a chair.

Miss Tōko always dressed smart, with thin black pants and a collared white blouse that seemed to look new every time you meet her. Combined with her short hair and the way it made her neck show, it gave her the image of a company secretary, though I thought that with her scary, piercing look, especially if she didn't have her glasses on, it would probably be impossible that she would ever get such a job.

"Morning, Kokutō." Miss Tōko gave a glance in my direction, like she always does, to acknowledge my presence. No glasses were worn over her hawk eyed glare today, a sign that she and Shiki were probably talking business.

"I'm sorry, ma'am. I guess I fell asleep."

"Don't start with excuses. I can see well enough. If you're fully with us on planet Earth now, then go make something to drink. A cup of coffee would be good. It should warm your bones a bit after that long rest."

Long rest? Well, I did feel exceptionally tired, so it wasn't a completely strange thing to say. I don't know why Miss Tōko would say it, but she's always talking cryptically at the best of times anyway, so not asking her has become the standard operating procedure.

"How about you, Shiki? Need a drink?" I managed to ask in my groggy state, only half aware of my surroundings.

"Nah, I'm good. I'm about to hit the sack soon, anyway."

Lazy eyes and sagging shoulders tell the story of Shiki's sleeplessness well enough. Probably went and did another one of those nightly strolls again last night.

Next to Miss Tōko's office room was another one that served the purposes of a kitchen, at least to her. To me, it looked more like a laboratory, or at the very least it used to look like one. The sink had three faucets in a row, just like you'd see in a lab. Two of those had wires strapped around them, either disabled or possessing some unearthly, forbidden function , the operation of which I suspect only passed between God and Miss Tōko. God sure wasn't revealing anything, and Miss Tōko is of the same mindset, and I was in no particular rush to find out. Either way, it gave the entire room a disturbing air.

I turn on the coffee maker, and it emits a low hum as it processes the drink. The first thing I do upon arriving here every day is make coffee for Miss Tōko, so it's come to the point where I could do it with my eyes closed. It's been almost half a year since I've started working for her. "Work" in this case being a very loose term. This place could hardly be called your typical office environment. Despite that, I stay on, probably because I saw something in what she worked on.

Just after Shiki lapsed into a coma, I graduated high school and entered college with no motivation or any particular purpose. At some point back in our high school days, me and Shiki made a deal to go to college together. Even if Shiki had no hope of waking up, I still wanted to keep that promise. But my life after Shiki's coma was one of aimless drifting, just watching the calendar as the days swept past.

One day I was invited by an acquaintance to a doll and puppet exhibit, and it was there that I found it: A doll in the shape and size of a human, so finely made that it must have taken its craftsman years of hard work; some

measure of his soul went into that doll. Though I knew it was just a doll like anything else there, it looked more like a human being, frozen in place, and one I was sure would move any second now, if someone breathed into it. A thing on the brink of existence, but didn't live, preserved on the boundary that no one else walked.

I was attracted to that contradiction, maybe because it reminded me so much of the person that Shiki was before. Apparently, the maker of the doll was unknown. Even the pamphlet of the exhibit didn't mention any names. I dove into investigation, desperately seeking the person who could craft such a beautiful doll. It turned out to be someone not entirely connected to the business of doll making, and did it with no real intent for fame. A mysterious recluse named Tōko Aozaki.

Apparently she makes dolls as her main occupation, but was also an architect on the side. She seemed to be involved in just generally "making" things, whatever those things may be, but she never accepts requests. Mysteriously, she just knows who needs things made, goes to them, announces her intent, and proceeds to make whatever it is they want after receiving a generous advance payment.

She must be the world's greatest freelance craftsman, or the world's biggest weirdo.

I got even more interested in finding her after that, even though I got a sense that I really should have quit at that point. Something seemed to pull at my effort, almost as if she didn't want to be found out. Eventually, through much time and record searching, I found out she lived in some place away from the city, not in the suburbs, or the industrial district.

It wasn't even a house.

It's an abandoned building.

Well, to be more specific, it's a building where construction was stopped when it was halfway done, probably because whoever funded it ran out of money. It has the shape of a building, seen from afar, but inside the floor and walls are bare. It was left as it was, neglected and surrendered to time and the weather. Had it been completed, it would have had six floors, but there's nothing above the fourth floor. Nowadays it would be more efficient to start the bulk of the construction from the top, but I guess they were still using the old methods back then. Now the fifth floor has been dragooned into the service of a roof. Though surrounded by a high concrete wall, anyone who wanted to go in would have an easy time of it, since the gate was always open. It's a miracle the local kids don't mess around in it. They probably just see it as some suspicious, dangerous building they should stay out of. Pretty convenient.

I don't know if Miss Tōko really bought the building, but it seems that way, so for now, she stays here. The laboratory-slash-coffee room I'm in right now is situated on the fourth floor, and the second and third are Miss Tōko's various offices, storage rooms, and workshops, so we usually talk shop on the fourth floor.

After finding Miss Tōko, I got to know her and asked for employment of some sort, just to sate my interest in this master craftswoman. I quit college, and started working for her. And amazingly enough, I actually get paid. She once said to me that humans can be divided into two types with two attributes: those who craft and search, and those who use and destroy. She made it clear to me that I wasn't someone who "crafted" but one who "searched" or some such, and that's why she hired me.

"Running a little late there, Kokutō," said an accusatory voice from the other room. It was Miss Tōko, her patience obviously running thin. Well, the coffee maker's just about done, and the black liquid sits there, waiting to be drunk.

"Yesterday makes the eighth," Miss Tōko says abruptly, while stubbing out her cigarette. "Soon people are going to take notice of their connection."

She is, of course, talking about the recent case of high school girls falling to their deaths. There's nothing else to talk about anyway, so I guess this was as good a topic as any. But wait...eight?

"Huh? Weren't there only six people?"

"A few more popped up while you still had sand in your eyes. All this started in June, and it's been going at about three per month. Maybe another one'll happen before the next three days are out, eh?" Miss Tōko is in the habit of saying really ominous things, so I'm kind of used to it. I take a quick glance at the calendar, noticing that there's only three days left in August. For a moment, a flash of worry enters my mind for some reason, but I quickly dismiss it.

"They're saying the suicides have no relation, though," I remark. "Different schools, no friends of the third degree or anything like that. It could still turn out that the police are withholding information from the media to better their chances when they interview the perp...if this case even has one."

"What, Kokutō, you don't trust the police on this one? That sleep must have really done a number on you to suddenly be skeptical of people like that." She grins. As usual, her spite knows no bounds when her glasses are

off.

"Because they didn't leave behind a suicide note, right?" I explain. "Suicidals usually leave behind a note or some sort of last message to the living. I mean, what is it six...erm, eight people now? At least one of them should have done it. That only means one of two things: that the police aren't publicizing the note so that it serves as leverage against a suspect, or it could mean a statistical improbability."

"Which by itself becomes the only thing connecting these incidents," says Miss Tōko. "The girls weren't taking drugs, nor were they members of some weird cult. By all accounts their lives were perfectly mundane. Neither their family nor their friends know any reason why they would throw themselves off a building. So it follows that they probably killed themselves over some emotional or psychological distress, or perhaps to prove something. That's why they don't leave behind any last words."

"So you're saying that it's not that the police are hiding anything, it's that they truly didn't have any suicide note?" I ask.

"Well, statistically speaking, most people don't leave behind any note when they commit suicide...but yeah." Miss Tōko leans back on her chair, sipping her coffee while looking at me funny. I put a mug to my own lip and tip it, tasting the bitter coffee inside. I think back on what she said, something nagging me in the reasoning.

How could there be no suicide note? It didn't fit. The girls were, as far as we knew, all happy and content, very much attached to the world of the living. In a situation where one is forced to die, final words are what you leave behind to cement that connection. Not doing so means you have nothing to leave to this world, and you can decide to bravely face that great unknown of death. A suicide without a note, or parting words, or even the remote chance of discovery of the incident: that would be the perfect suicide.

Jumping off a building, then, is far from the perfect suicide.

Such an exhibitionist act makes the suicide clear and attention-grabbing. In a way, the suicide and the resulting publicity itself results in having the air of a "suicide note", so to speak. If the suicidals picked as obvious and public a method as jumping off a building, then they did so knowing they would be seen by many. Publicity formed at least a part of their choice of death. In that case, why the lack of parting words at all?

I can think of only one reason. Perhaps, like Shiki said once, they were just accidents, or at the very least, they did not intend to die. Then they wouldn't have any reason to write a suicide note, just like running into a traffic accident while going home from school. Unfortunately, I can't fath-

om why you'd jump off from a building while taking your daily commute from school, though.

"There won't be any more girls hitting the pavement for a while after the eighth, 'least not ones related to these incidents.' Shiki, now standing beside the window, joins the conversation.

"How could you possibly know that?" I say.

"How else? I checked. There were eight of them floating around that building. I took care of 'em, but they'll be there for a little while longer, even if it does make me sick." Shiki faces away from the window, posing with arms crossed. "Say, Tōko, do all people end up flying that way when they bite the bullet?"

"No one really knows for sure. Everyone's different. All I can offer you is an observation." Miss Tōko puts down her cup, her smile morphing into a more scholarly demeanor, as if she was about to teach the most important thing in the world. "The words 'flying' and 'falling' are inextricably tied to each other, because we humans can't fly by ourselves. And yet, as expected of men, the more we reach for the sky, the more we forget this. Even those who live after death can try and reach for this goal, to fall towards the sky, forgetting that it is the hubris of Icarus that led to his doom."

Shiki seemed perturbed by Miss Tōko's cryptic response, more so than usual. I can only guess as to what offensive statement Miss Tōko said that has Shiki in such a defensive attitude. I decide to break the mood.

"Er, I'm sorry ma'am, but I can't seem to understand the topic."

"Apologies, Kokutō. We're talking about the ghost at the Fujō Tower. I don't really know if it's the real thing or just some mage's illusion. I wanted to check, but if Shiki really killed it, then there's no way to know for sure now."

So it was about that. The conversations between Shiki and glasses-off-Miss Tōko are always about the occult and the magical, so it wasn't that hard to guess anyway.

"You know that Shiki saw those girls floating around in the Fujō Tower, correct? Turns out there was another human figure flying around among those floating girls. Since they couldn't be removed, we figured perhaps that place was something akin to a net to them, or something along those lines."

In my mind, I am frowning at this story's sudden turn for the complex, and then, as if sensing my confusion, she offers her layman's summary of it.

"Well, to put it a bit more simply, there is one girl floating around that building, and tagging along with her are what looks like our famous suicide girls. I suspect that they're something like ghosts or some other supernatu-

ral occurrence. The end.”

I nod my understanding, but the way Shiki put it, I gather that the deed was already done and taken care of. Once again, the story seems far past me. It’s only been three months since I let these two get to know each other, but already I’m the one lagging behind on their peculiar conversations. Not that I had any particular interest in being involved in them either way. However, since being ignored was also an unacceptable outcome, I listen anyway. The way I’m stuck between their stranger world and my own willing or unwilling ignorance of it sort of fits me, in a way. It’s one of those small blessings I can be thankful for.

“That sounds like a story out of a dime novel,” I blurt out. Miss Tōko nods her agreement, smiling. Shiki, on the other hand, is somehow growing more wound up, casting accusatory sidelong glances at me. Because provoking a reaction out of Shiki works about as often as Mercury in retrograde, I have to wonder if I did something colossally idiotic without my knowing again.

“But then, Shiki saw the ghosts only at the beginning of July, right?” I sound dumb for asking the obvious, but I do it just to confirm. “So there were only four ghosts back then, Shiki?”

A negative shaking of the head from Shiki. “No, no, there were eight, right from the start. I told you right? There wouldn’t be any more suicides after the eighth. In their case, the order is reversed.”

“Uh huh. You gotta clarify with me whether or not you’ve gained any future predicting powers like that one girl we talked to some time ago.”

“It’s not like that, Mikiya. It’s more like that place...the air there isn’t normal. How do I put this?” Shiki’s voice uncharacteristically wavers a bit as a proper description fails to materialize. “It’s sort of like a strange sensation of being in the middle of boiling water and freezing water.”

As Shiki struggles with vocabulary, Miss Tōko steps in to help.

“It means that time there flows differently. Understand that there is more than one way for time to progress. The speed upon which entropy acts on something differs for each object. The same holds true for our memories. When a person dies, the record of him existing doesn’t disappear instantly. There are people who remember, people who have observed and watched over his life and death. As long as these exist, the memories..., or rather, their record of existence, doesn’t suddenly disappear, but only fades into nothingness. If the observer of death was not a person, but instead a place that resonates to people such as those girls, then they will remain even

after death as a sort of image, of wandering ‘ghosts’, or what have you. The only ones receptive to this image are the ones that share and keep the memory of these ghosts, such as close friends and family. And people like Shiki and me, of course.”

Miss Tōko lights another cigarette before continuing. “Entropy acts on memory too. People forget, and eventually the memories disappear. But on the roof of the Fujō Tower, the entropy of those memories are slower, as if the building itself doesn’t want to forsake them. The record of their time alive hasn’t caught up to their current state, and as a result, the memories, and the images of those girls remain, in that place where time is crooked and broken.”

Miss Tōko seems to finish her explanation, which I suspect managed to be even more puzzling than what Shiki would have eventually gotten to. So what she’s saying is that, when something dies or is lost, that thing doesn’t truly disappear, as long as someone remembers it. And that remembering it is to acknowledge its existence, and because of that, it can sometimes be seen again. That just sounds like deluding yourself.

Well, Miss Tōko probably kept using the word “image” because it is something of a delusion, a thing that can’t be real.

In a surprisingly frank display of annoyance, Shiki is led to that timeless impulse of headscratching. “Enough of these explanations, already. What I’m really worried about is *her*. My knife did a pretty good job of proving my point, but if there’s actually some mage using projection, then this’ll never end.” Another soild glance comes my way. “I’m tired of being Mikiya’s guardian, thank you very much.”

“I agree completely, Shiki. I’ll settle things with Kirie Fujō, so just go on and take Kokutō home...wait, he still has five hours to clock in, so you might want to sleep. You can use that place.”

Miss Tōko pointed to a spot on the floor that looks like it hasn’t been cleaned for at least half a year, littered with paper like a dirty furnace. Shiki, naturally, ignores her.

“So what was she, anyway?” Shiki asks Miss Tōko. The mage walks over to the window and stares outside, her footsteps inaudible, and with a cigarette still in her mouth. We don’t really have any light in this room, not electric light anyway. All the light comes from outside, and in certain areas of the building where the sun doesn’t reach, it can be surprisingly difficult to tell the time. In contrast, the view outside is clearly morning, perhaps somewhere closer to noon. For a few moments, Miss Tōko stares silently at the sun-bathed panorama.

“Before, you could have said that she flew.” She puffs out a cloud of

smoke, indistinguishable now from the white sunlight. From my position, framed by the sunlight and smoke, she looked like some sort of mirage. “Kokutō, what would you associate with a high place? What imagery comes to mind?” The sudden question snaps me back into focus. The only thing I could think about was the time I went atop Tokyo Tower. I remember trying real hard to spot my house, but in the end I couldn’t make it out among the many tall buildings I saw.

“Maybe...small things?”

“Trying a bit too hard there, Kokutō.”

Well, fine, I didn’t think that answer through too much anyway. I try to think of something else.

“Well, I can’t really think of anything in particular, but I do think that a panoramic view is beautiful. Just the sight of the scenery is overwhelming.” This was a more spontaneous response, which she somehow seems to note, acknowledging it with a little nod while still staring at the window. And like that, she continued to talk.

“Scenery seen from select vantage points is always wonderful. Even an otherwise mundane landscape becomes something special. Looking down at the world you live in, though, stimulates a different urge. In such a commanding view, there is but one impulse.”

As the word “impulse” leaves her mouth, she cuts off her sentence.

An impulse isn’t something that comes from reason or intelligence, not something that comes from within, but something that is triggered by an external force, even if one rejects it. Like a murderous, destructive urge. Then what is the destructive impulse that a view from on high brings?

“It’s how far everything is. A view too wide makes clear the boundary between you and the world. People can only rest easy with things they are familiar with. Even with an accurate map telling you your exact location, you know that’s only information. To us, the world only amounts to something we understand and feel from experience. The boundaries and connections of the world, and of countries, and of cities, are only constructs of the mind, not something we feel ourselves. But with a view too wide, there appear gaps in our understanding. You have a ten meter radius that you feel, and the ten kilometer space that you’re looking down on. They’re both one and the same, the same world that you’ve been living in, and yet the first one feels more real.

You see, now we have come upon a paradox. Rather than recognize the small world you can feel as the world you live in, you ascribe it to the wide world you can only see. But within this wide world, you cannot feel that you truly exist. Because the closer objects are to your person, the more

sure you can be of their existence, of their reality. In this way, reason, represented by your knowledge, and experience, represented by instinct, will start to conflict. Eventually, one will lose, and confusion sets in.

'Viewing the city from up here sure puts it into perspective. I can't believe my house was down there. Did the park always look that way? I didn't even know that street or that alley or that building ever existed! This is a city I've never seen before, like I've gone far, far away.' Those are the sort of thoughts that run through your head in a panoramic view."

In a lull in her speech, I manage to sneak in a question which has been nagging me since the start.

"So, what, looking out from a vantage point is somehow bad now?"

"Only if you gaze for too long. Remember that in the old myths, traveling the sky was akin to traveling another world. To fly was to ascend to a higher world, or perhaps to meet one's final reward in the afterlife. Mortals who ascended the skies became mad, unless they armed themselves with charms or the power of reason. And always, lunacy was cured by returning to solid ground."

Now that she mentions it, I did have this indescribable urge to jump from the school roof once, just to see what would happen if I did. It must run through everybody's minds at some point, when looking at that view. Of course, I didn't really want to do it, but why did I think that way when it clearly leads to my own death? Why do other people think that way?

"Does that mean that, if only for a moment, you go mad?" After I mention the question, Miss Tōko bursts into laughter.

"Kokutō, you have to understand that thinking that is normal. Dig into people's dreams and you find them dreaming the taboo, eventually. We possess the extraordinary ability of indulging our own fantasies with our own imagination. Though you *are* right in a way. What's important is that we know that the fantasy has its place. Well, I guess that's obvious. But in your example, it's less 'crazy' and more like a 'numbing of thought.'"

"Tōko, this has gone on long enough." Shiki interrupts, sick of the one-sided conversation. Well, we *have* drifted quite far from the main topic so it wouldn't be uncalled for in this case.

"There's nothing long about it. In fact, were this an actual thought experiment, we'd only be ankle deep into it."

"Well, cut it down to a phrase, will you? When you and Mikiya talk, it's like a goddamn thesis committee."

Strong words, but words which I can accept have an all too valid point.

"Shiki..." Miss Tōko starts, rubbing her temple in frustration, but Shiki continues to complain, ignoring the both of us.

"And then there's this business of views from high places. I hope you remember that just by walking around, we're already 'viewing from a high place' already." Air quotations by Shiki. "There's no 'normal view' by your logic."

Well, someone's wound up. As expected, Shiki's already trying to punch holes in Miss Tōko's argument. Certainly, a person's eyes are higher than the ground, which would qualify them for a "high place", I guess. Miss Tōko nods in approval at Shiki, and continues her speech, probably condensed now for the sake of Shiki's temper.

"Even if we count the fact that the ground isn't actually flat but at an angle, we also don't usually call our normal vision to be a 'commanding' or 'overlooking' view. There's a reason for that. Your vision isn't exactly as your eyes see it, but something more of a signal the mind interprets and comprehends. Protected as we are by our 'common sense', we don't perceive such sight as 'high', and we don't call it such. It's 'normal'...whatever nebulous value anyone might ascribe to that word."

Our mental perceptions, on the other hand, also stand perched on its own vantage point. Different minds perceive different things, but all are imprisoned, asleep in a paradigm of material reality. Awakened minds bearing a more malleable paradigm, such as those of mages, can bend its rules, but never truly break them. To cross that boundary is to become something more and less human. A god, but absent the restraint. And so Hypnos becomes Thanatos."

As she says this, Miss Tōko continues to look out at the window, in a commanding view of the street, the town—perhaps the world. She's looking at the world with her feet firmly in the ground, which I thought was important for some reason. I suddenly remember my dream.

Before it ended, I remember the butterfly fell towards the ground. Were the butterfly not so intent to follow me, she could have flown more gracefully. If she had just floated and not flapped her wings so hard, she could have flown longer. But perhaps, seeing the dragonfly and how it flew, it could no longer bear to just float. That's why it flew.

Miss Tōko threw her expended cigarette out the window. "The fluctuation at the Fujō Tower might have been her perception of the world. The uneasiness in the air that Shiki felt were the bars of the prison. A place steeped in numina."

A few seconds pass without Miss Tōko saying a word, which Shiki and I take as a sign that she's finally finished talking. The long sigh and wandering eyes tell me that Shiki's melancholic demeanor calms down at last. "Bars of the prison, huh? I wonder if that girl was inside or outside." Saying

this dismissively, Shiki's head is tilted to one side, tired of talking.

"Well, I'd say wherever you are, she's on the opposite side," counters Miss Tōko.

 / 4

It's 2:00 in the morning, and the bone in my nape creaks from the cold. I shiver in spite of myself, and I wonder if it's the chill that's doing it, or my own mind. For the moment, I cast aside my reservations and enter the Fujō Tower, no sight or sound of life indicating any sort of welcome for me. Only the electric light illuminating the cream-colored walls of the entrance hallway, a light that looked too artificial and lacking in human warmth that it ended up being more eerie than the darkness it was supposed to sweep away. At the entrance lies a card checker for the former tenants, now unused and broken. Without stopping, I pass by it, going through the hallway and into an elevator. The situation is the same as it looked outside: no people except for me. The elevator has one of those mirrors that people can use to ogle themselves while they wait. It reflects a person wearing a light blue kimono with a black leather jacket, with the lazy eyes of someone tired of doing this job.

I press the button that leads to the rooftop while looking at my reflection in the mirror. With nothing but the low hum of the elevator accompanying me, I wait as the world begins to rise.

For now until this mechanical box reaches the rooftop, this elevator is a prison. The events of the outside are from an entirely different world, an entirely different existence. For now, this is all that is real. I allow this thought to slip into my mind unbidden, though I should be focusing on the task at hand.

The sliding door opens with only the slightest hint of a sound, leading into a small storage room whose only feature is the door leading outside to the rooftop. The room has this oppressive lack of light that makes me think that the door to the roof opens to that different world I fleetingly felt, the world that I saw in the reflective circus of the buildings' windows. It's a boundary of emptiness. Crossing the room with my footsteps resounding against the narrow space, I open the door.

The room is black as pitch, but it melds into the now visible void of the endless night sky. My eyes take in the view of the city from on high. There was nothing special about the Fujō Tower. It had a perfectly constructed and level floor made of concrete, and a chain-link fence surrounding the roof. Aside from the water tank that stood atop the room I just exited out of, there isn't anything else here. Except for the view.

The height is at least ten stories higher than any building in the vicinity, giving it a lonely feeling. It's like being on top of a tall ladder, staring

down into the depths of the world below you. If the world below were the ocean, then the scattered lights of buildings would be the anglerfish, the only lights in an otherwise black world where neither sunlight nor moonlight reach. A beautiful sight.

The world is sleeping, perhaps for eternity, but unfortunately only for the moment. The stillness grips my heart tighter than any cold wind, and it feels painful. Stars glitter in the sky like jewels, and the moon is out, brighter than anything. In my education at the family manor, I was taught that the moon was not the sun's mirror, but a window to a different reality. A polar opposite to stand as a gate to twilight.

The moon has long been associated with the arcane, femininity, and death. And as that moon shines brightly over our world, the figure of a woman floats eerily in the sky above, silhouetted harshly against the moonlight, accompanied by eight girls flying around her.

The floating woman specter is wearing a white cloth that looked like it could pass for a dress, and she has black hair that reaches down all the way to her waist. What little you can see of her arms and legs through the cloth reveal how slender she is. Her eyebrows, too, follow this mold, and her eyes hold inside them piercing cold, making her countenance one of the most beautiful I've seen. From her looks, I'd say she's in her early twenties, though it's probably foolish to attach anything like "age" to something like a ghost. And yet she doesn't possess the distorted air of a ghost that marks them so well. She looks as if she could pass muster for being alive. The girls swimming in the air around her, who fade in and out of sight, look more the part. Above me, this lonely procession continued; the womanly figure, and the girls floating in a protective formation. I found it unsettling, not so much repulsive, but more like...

"I see. This is all a spell of yours, isn't it?" I sneer.

I didn't notice it before now, but I note the woman's face again, seeing some inhuman quality to its beauty. Were the wind blowing strongly tonight, her smooth black hair, each strand finely combed, would strike an otherworldly chord in anyone's heart. Otherworldly, and inhuman.

"Then I'm gonna have to kill you."

As if noticing me for the first time, the woman's eyes finally cast downward, and I return the favor, our eyes taking in each other's measure. No more words are spoken. None are needed.

From inside my jacket, I draw a blade, a fine weapon seven inches in length.

The woman's gaze from above fills me with the urge to kill. The beautiful white dress sways in the air. The slender arm moves like water, and points an accusatory finger at me. Those slender limbs no longer seem beautiful, and look more fragile now.

"Like a bone, or a lily."

Tonight, there was no wind, and my voice reverberated in the night sky.

You can fly. When the woman points her finger at me, I hear a voice intruding in my consciousness; perhaps hers, were she able to speak. It buries itself inside, digging in, and telling me I can fly. The mental assault makes me lose balance for a moment, but with only one step I regain composure. Overhead, the woman hesitates. Now I see.

You must fly. She tries again, this time stronger, more assertive. It is met with similar resistance. And then, finally, *finally*, my Eyes look at her.

And there they are. One on each leg, one on her back, a little one in her left chest. I can see the lines, separating her body into little sections. The one in her chest is likely the best target. Hitting that'd mean instant death. This woman could be some sort of image, some delusion, or a ghost. But in the end it doesn't matter. Because with my Eyes, even gods can die.

Holding my knife in a reverse grip, edge-out, I raise my right hand, narrowing my gaze at my enemy while doing so. But she attacks me again.

I can fly. I can fly. I loved the sky since I was a child. I flew yesterday too. I can fly higher today. Freely. Peacefully. Smiling. I have to go quickly. To where? To the sky? To freedom? Let's escape from reality! Yearn for the sky! Fight gravity. Be restless enough not to stay in one place. Fly unconsciously.

Let's go. Let's go.

GO!

"You gotta be fucking kidding, right?"

I raise my free left hand. The mental suggestion doesn't work. I don't even lose my balance anymore.

"Can't seem to take a liking to flying. Don't know how to feel alive—been that way for a while—so I don't know the pain of living. To be honest, I don't really give a damn about you," I murmur, almost singing it. It's true though. Joy and sorrow, freedom and restraint; I can't feel any of them. That's why I can't see this fuss about being liberated from pain.

"But taking him was a big mistake. Finders keepers, and I found him first. You're going to give him back."

My left hand grabs the air like a rope, and I pull back. The woman and

the other girls are pulled towards me, like a fisherman plucking a good catch.

The woman's expression changes. She tries her last, vain hope of controlling me, trying her best to put as much power into her suggestion.

FALL!

And again, I disregard it completely. With all the firmness in my voice I can muster, I answer her back.

"You fall."

As she comes toward me, I plunge the knife deep into her chest, as naturally as I do stabbing a fruit, and so exquisitely performed that it gives even the victim pause for admiration. The knife runs from front to back, clean through her.

She doesn't bleed. Unable to move from the shock of being stabbed straight through, she convulses just once. With only a nudge and a slight movement of my right arm, I fling away the useless "corpse", and the incorporeal body slips through the fence without a sound into the shining city below. Her hair still lies motionless, and her dress embraces the darkness, a white flower sinking to the bottom of the ocean.

And with that, I depart from the roof, the ghosts still floating in the air behind me.

I 5

With the impact of steel lightning on my chest, I awaken.

It was a staggering attack, one that proved how strong my opponent was, if one can drive through a person's chest that easily. But it wasn't a strike born out of anger, or desperation. A singular thrust delivered with no wasted energy, one that would slide easily in between bone and sinew.

It wasn't the pain that hurt me. Rather, it was the feeling of me being ripped apart, and the sound of the knife plunging deep, deep into my heart. That incomparably bittersweet fear. My body shook and trembled at the thought of it. My silent weeping contained my uneasiness, my loneliness, my will to live. My tears aren't from the pain either, or from the fear of the encounter. It was for the brush of death that I had never before experienced, but had now fallen in love with, even though I pray every night for the strength to live.

I hear the distinct sound of the door opening, a sound that I have grown very familiar with. Even though I know it's nighttime, the far off glow of the buildings in the city induces the same sensation as sunlight. It's not yet time for my regular examination, so the person who came must be a visitor. I have a private room, so I'm almost always alone. My sole company here is the bed, the cream colored curtain which never flutters in the wind, and the lights from the outside world, ghostly yet radiant.

"Excuse me. You would be Kirie Fujō, correct?" Even her deep voice can't mask that the visitor is a woman. After greeting me, she goes to my bedside, ignoring the chair and choosing instead to stare down at me coldly. A frightening person, one who I feel can destroy me with a snap of her fingers if she so wished. Yet, in my heart, I still feel happy. It's been many years since I had any sort of visitor. I couldn't turn her away, even if she is Death herself come to take me.

"And you are the enemy, correct?" I reply. The woman nods. Perhaps it may just be the light from the faint shining beacons of the city, but when I try to focus my vision on the visitor, I can barely see her. Her clothes are without blemish, reminding me of the neatness of a school teacher. It makes me rest more easily, somehow. The gaudy orange necktie she wears contrasts sharply with her white blouse, however, making her look vaguely amusing.

"Do you know that child who stabbed me?" I say apprehensively, "or perhaps it is you?"

"No, fortunately. I'm an acquaintance of your attacker and your victim."

One of them anyway. We meet the strangest people, you and I.”

She takes out something from her breast pocket, but puts it away just as quickly. “Apologies. Smoking isn’t allowed here I suppose? For someone with lung damage like you, it would be like poison.” I guess what she took out was a cigarette carton. The image of her smoking fits her look, I think, like a mannequin with lizard pumps and a bag.

“But it isn’t just the lung, is it?” Her voice is one of curiosity as she looks me over. “Certainly, that’s where it all started, but there are tumors all over your body. Sarcoma is only the beginning, but it’s worse inside. Your hair is the only thing that’s left. You have much strength. A normal person would have died long before as this sickness ate them alive.” She pauses a moment to look at me straight, then offers a smile.

“How long has this gone on, Kirie Fujō?”

I can’t answer. “I have no idea. I stopped keeping count.” Because there’s no meaning to it. Because dying was the only way out of here.

She murmurs a soft-breathed “I see.”

I hated her voice that lacked any compassion or hate. The only thing I can receive from people is their sympathy, and she denies me even that.

“Shiki told me the cut was around the area of the left ventricle and the aorta, so it might have been the mitral valve. Is it all right?” She says such an absurd thing so normally. The peculiarity of her manner of speech catches me off guard, and I smile despite myself.

“You’re a strange one, aren’t you? If my heart had really been cut, then we wouldn’t be able to talk like this, would we?”

“Quite right. I was only confirming.” I see. She was a friend of the person who stabbed me after all, perhaps trying to tie up loose ends on the battle that took place in the rooftop. “But it won’t be long until it affects you as well. Shiki’s Eyes are potent, perhaps even beyond what that child knows. The sympathetic connection between your double existences means that the spell will reach you in time. There are a few inquiries I need to make, which is why I’m here.” She means the “other” me when she mentions the double existence, I’d imagine.

“Because I haven’t personally gone to the Fujō Tower, I haven’t seen your floating image there,” she continues. “What was it really?”

“I don’t know, to be honest. For the longest time now, the scenery outside the window was the world to me. I looked down on the panorama, watching the seasons fly past, and the coming and going of people in the hospital. My voice is never heard, and my hands never reach anything. And I grew to curse this view as I continued to suffer alone in this room.”

The woman’s eyebrows crease as she contemplates on something. “I

see now. So you really are a woman of the Fujō bloodline. Your dynasty is an old one, and pure. It's thought that you and your dynasty granted blessings of providence, but now I see that your true abilities lie in cursing. The clue was in your name, as Fujō can also mean "defile." A fitting name, don't you think?"

Dynasty.

My family.

But that too is a chapter of my life that's forever gone. Not long after I was hospitalized, both my parents and my brother met an accident and lost their lives. My medical expenses have been paid by a man who calls himself my father's friend, a curiously named man that had the air of a monk about him.

"But a curse is not so easily performed. What was it that you wished for so hard?" I can't help but smile a little bit. Finally, we have something that even she doesn't know about.

"Have you known what it is to look down on the outside world for so long? To look at such a view for years and years, even as your consciousness erodes? I have hated, cursed, and feared the outside world for so long now, seeing it all from on high. And one day, something happened. It suddenly seemed as if I was in the sky above the hospital courtyard, the one outside my window. I could look down on everything. My body and mind were still in the room, but I felt my vision fly in the sky. But I still couldn't move from here, and my vision didn't go anywhere beyond this hospital."

"Your mind must have gained correspondence with the surroundings, considering how long you've been here. Your spatial awareness must have been quite strong." For the second time now, she pauses before she says, "Is that the time when you started to lose your eyesight?"

It seems there is little about me this woman doesn't know even before she entered the room. It's true, though. I will soon be fully blind. I nod my answer.

"Yes. I could do nothing as the world slowly turned into nothingness. At first, I thought that everything was just turning into a deep darkness. But it was the void I was gazing into. But this didn't bother me, because my real eyes were floating high up in the sky. I can only see the view around the hospital, but I was never going to get out of here anyway. Nothing really changed, if you think about it. Nothing ever changed..."

I have a short coughing fit. It's been such a long time since I talked to anyone for this long, it hurts my throat and lungs, and focusing too much makes my eyes burn.

"I see," she replies after I compose myself. "You projected your con-

sciousness in the sky. But if that was your consciousness, then you should truly be dead, since Shiki killed your ‘ghost’ consciousness.”

In truth, I’ve actually been thinking that as well. This woman keeps saying the name Shiki, who I assume to be my assailant. How was that person able to stab me? The me floating in the Fujō Tower can’t touch anything, but also cannot be affected in turn. Yet this Shiki slashed me as if that was my real body.

“Answer me. Was that truly you in the Fujō Tower?” she asks with a tone of curiosity laced with the forcefulness that has never left her voice since she came inside the room.

“It...wasn’t. I only stare at the sky, while she exists in it. That other me turned its back on me. Self abandons self.” Wording it that way made it seem like more than an affectation. I did truly turn my back on the world, as it had abandoned me. And I abandoned myself, of any hope that my sickness would get better. Being separated from the world outside the window and unable to break through that boundary no matter how hard I prayed every night, both me and the other me couldn’t put our feet firmly on the ground, and were resigned to an ephemeral, fragile existence. We share that similarity, despite parting with each other. I suppose it’s what this woman called a “sympathetic connection”.

She draws a short breath, perhaps in surprise. It’s the first time that this person has shown any sort of uncalculated emotion, and it surprises me a little. “So it’s not that your consciousness was separated, but that you were acting on two vessels with one state of mind. Someone else gave you this vessel. It’s unlike any work I’ve seen yet, I understand that much.” A small nod before she regards me with a frighteningly disappointed look. “But why go through so much just to lure children to throw themselves off buildings? Why were you not content with just looking at the world?”

Ah, those poor, enviable girls. What happened to them still saddens me. But I had nothing to do with them. They fell because they wanted to.

“You used the image of you at the Fujō Tower as more of a channel for your will, didn’t you? You reached out to them in sleep, in their dreams of flight. And in those dreamscapes, at least one or two of them were probably on the verge of awakening to magic, which is why you could notice them in the mess of other minds in this city, and why you can snare them so easily. But it was you who made them think about flying while they were outside of sleep, even as they weren’t really ‘awake’. They tried to fly, and they got the natural result of trying to do the impossible.”

Yes. In the fever dreams, they always fly around me, and I thought that we could be friends. But they never noticed me, never talked to me, never

touched me. All they did was float around like fishes without consciousness. I thought that, when they were outside of sleep, in the times when they were conscious, they could notice me. That was the only way I knew...

"You're trembling, friend. Are you cold?" The woman's voice returns to its previous icy demeanor. I clutch myself as the unearthly wind fails to subside, despite the window being closed. "I'd like to ask you one more thing. Why yearn so much for the sky of a world you so detest?"

A difficult question. I answer to the best of my ability. "In the sky, you can fly as far as you want, go as far as you can go, because it never ends. I thought I could find a world that I didn't hate, and a world that could accept me in turn."

"Did you find that world?"

My shivering doesn't subside, the chill acting like invisible hands shaking my body. My eyes sear with pain from being focused for so long. I nod yes.

"Before I sleep every night, I fear that I will not wake up the next day. I fear that one day, it will be morning, and my eyes will never open again. But it's also the reason why I feel alive. Strange, isn't it? My hollow shell of a body and poor excuse for a life is always shadowed by death, but it's that shadow which I rely on to keep myself alive." Yes, that's the reason why I yearn for death more than life. Death is release. To fly without end, to go anywhere one wishes...that's the world I can yearn for.

"So you took my acquaintance as a companion to your world?"

"No. At that time, I didn't know. I was still longing for life, and while doing so, I wanted to fly. I thought I could do so if I was with him. Those times are long gone now."

"You and Shiki aren't so different from each other. Both of you believe you can find salvation in someone like Kokutō. It isn't wrong to think you can feel alive and be saved by someone else."

Kokutō. I see. So this Shiki confronted me to take him back. Even though I know now that my savior is also the harbinger of Death, I feel no regrets. "He's still a child. Always looking at the sky. Always so honest. That's why I thought he could take me anywhere if he put his mind to it. I...I wanted him to take me away from all of this." I start to cry, and it stings my eyes so much they seem to scream in pain.

It's not really because I'm sad. What happiness it could have been had he been able to spirit me away! But it will never come true. It was always a far dream. But it was such a beautiful dream, and because of that I couldn't stop the tears. In my eternity in this prison, it was the only dream I've had in so many years, the only delusion I allowed myself.

"But Kokutō has no interest in the sky. Those who long for the sky are

the farthest from it. Ironic, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is. People always seem to have the things we don't need. I could never truly fly. Floating was all I could do." The burning in my eyes subsides, a feeling that will probably never happen again. The wind's invisible hands grip my spine and make me tremble even more strongly.

"I've been a burden long enough. This question will have to be my last. What are you going to do after this? I can cure the creeping pain Shiki gave you through your other vessel, if that is your wish." I don't answer her, save for shaking my head no. I can't see for sure, but it seems like she's frowning. "I understand. There are two ways to escape: escape without a purpose, and escape with a purpose. I call the former 'floating', and the latter 'flight'. You are the only one that decides which of the two your view of the world from on high was. But you don't choose these paths because of the weight on your soul. We don't choose the path we take because of the sins we carry. But we carry our sins on the path we choose."

After saying her parting words, the woman leaves. She never said her name, but I know now that she didn't need to. I don't doubt for a moment that she knows what I am going to do. Because for me there is no choice: I can't fly. I can only float. I can't do what she says because I'm weak. That's why I can no longer resist this temptation: The flash of realization when I was stabbed in the heart. The overwhelming torrent of death and the pulse of life. I thought I no longer had anything left, but I was left with such a simple, sweet thing.

Death.

It was not the nonexistent wind, but death, that little fear, that gripped my spine in these last moments. I need to experience more of death to feel the joy of life, the glory of everything I had ignored in my life until now. But that death I experienced on that night, the pain that pierced me like a needle, like a sword, like lightning, would be impossible to replicate. I cannot hope for such a vivid end now. But I will try to come as close to it as much as I can. I still have a few days to think on it, but the method need not even be said.

I think my last moment should be spent on a high place, a place where I can look down on a panorama of the world, and fall back to the embrace of the reality that has rejected me so.

Panorama - III

The sun has already fallen as we leave the abandoned building Miss Tōko calls home. Shiki's apartment is quite close by, but my apartment is about twenty minutes away by train. Shiki's groggy pace and an unsteady walk remind me of the lack of sleep mentioned earlier, and I stay close beside just in case it's needed. Out of the blue, Shiki asks me a strange question.

"Hey, Mikiya. Do you think suicide is right?"

"Hmm, let me think on that..." I say, trying to drum up a good answer. "Well, let's put it this way. Say I had a terribly deadly retrovirus, such that me just staying alive threatens all of Tokyo. If dying meant everyone would be saved, then maybe I'd kill myself."

"What in the hell? That's such a far-fetched scenario it hurts my brain." Shiki makes a disappointed face.

"Let me finish, alright? Think about it for a moment. I don't know about you, but I wouldn't have the will to live while the whole of Tokyo sees me as the carrier of a virulent plague. Choosing suicide would be the easier path. An instant of determination, or a lifetime; I think you can tell which is the hard choice. And that's what it boils down to, isn't it? Death is the easy choice. And when push comes to shove, I don't truly think I have what it takes to make the hard decision."

After that, we continue to walk in silence, leaving me to think more about what I said. In my scenario, sacrificing yourself might certainly be the right thing. It might even be called heroic, another one for the books. But choosing death for yourself, no matter the practicality of such an action, seems the foolish thing to do. Struggling through the slings and arrows allows us to put ourselves to right, and emerge as better people. That's true bravery, which I don't think I could muster. I don't say it though, since I feel like Shiki is getting annoyed at me again, looking at me doubtfully after my answer.

"Anyway," I try to conclude awkwardly, "Each person has his own answers, I guess."

"You're different, though," says Shiki, as if reading my mind. Shiki said it in the usual cold front, granted, but it feels as if there's a compliment in there somewhere. Slightly taken aback, I couldn't bring myself to answer it, and we continue to walk through the city silently. Pretty soon I can hear the bustle of people and the noise of engines. It sounds like we're nearing the city's main street, with its ostentatious display of lights and sounds, accompanied by the wave of people commuting home after a day's work. I can just make out the department stores in the distance, and not too far

after that is the train station.

Shiki stops suddenly.

“Mikiya, stay over at my place tonight.”

“What in th—”

Shiki takes me by the shoulder in a gesture firmly in the “just fucking do it, c’mon” variety. Shiki’s apartment *is* closer, and it would be easier that way, but I don’t think I really should on moral grounds.

“It’s all right, really,” I try to say. “It’d be boring even if I do go there. Or are you saying there’s something you need me to do?” I know there really wasn’t anything, so this should have been the end of the discussion, and yet Shiki looks at me accusatorily, like I was at fault.

“Strawberry.”

“Er...”

“Those goddamn ice cream cups you bought a while back. They’re still there. Eat the damn things.”

“Well, I suppose I did buy them.” Got me there. I bought that on a hot day on my way to Shiki’s home. Was it really that hot? It’s almost September after all. Well, whatever. Not like it matters in the grand scheme of things. Shiki’s pulling any excuse to get me to stay, and I suppose I have no choice but to follow. But I can at least make a feeble attempt to strike back. There is a topic—serving almost like a trigger—which, when brought to discussion, makes Shiki mad but unable to retort back properly. It’s about something I really want Shiki to do, but in this matter, the universe seems to have seen it proper to bestow upon Shiki the stubbornness of mules.

“I can see there’s no persuading you. All right, I’ll stay over. But Shiki...” Harsh eyes look at me, and I respond with as serious a face I can muster. “‘Eat the damn thing?’ Such unseemly words. I’d really like it if you did something about that. I mean, you *are* a girl after all.”

Right on target. After I say “girl,” she points a finger at her lips and says “Hey, my mouth, my choice of words. Got it?”

Epilogue

That was the day when, led on by nothing except an impulse of curiosity, I took the main avenue on the way home. It wasn't a shortcut, and I didn't plan on passing by any particular place there. It was just something I decided to do on a whim.

This part of the avenue was full of skyscrapers and tall condos, some old, more of them new, while others were abandoned husks, all commingled into one crowded skyline. I'd wager everybody in the city, including me, was tired of looking at them day in and day out. While walking beside the buildings, I suddenly saw something fall from a roof to the concrete sidewalk a ways ahead of me.

It was a person.

In the moment that that person fell, I heard a sickening sound. The wet, raw sound you associate with the kind of things you don't want happening anywhere near you. The kind of sound you never really get to hear often. Judging from the height that the person fell from, it was clear that whoever he or she was died the instant it hit pavement.

As I drew closer to the point of impact, I was able to scrutinize what happened more clearly. All that was left, all that my mind could take in, was the scarlet trail seeping across the asphalt; the frail, bone-like limbs, and the long, black hair, which still retained some of its living beauty.

And that dead face.

The scene struck my mind with the image of a flower pressed between the pages of an old, musty tome. It all seemed vaguely familiar. I knew what happened here. In the end, I suppose she chose the true slumber, instead of the lie.

A throng of people had already begun to gather around, and Azaka and I soon had to work our way through them, avoiding the crowd.

"Miss Tōko, that was a jumper, wasn't it?"

"I suppose," I answer almost absent-mindedly. My part in this case had long since played out. Society had better things to do than psychoanalyze a jumper that just decided to take a tumble out of a building. In the end, they'd say one suicide is no different from the next. Kirie's last wish, right up to the end, was not flight, or even floating, but to fall. A pity, but it's best not to dwell on it for long.

"I've heard there were quite a lot of cases last year, but I guess it's still a trend, huh? I don't really understand what goes through these people's minds, though. Would you, Miss Tōko?"

I nod my head; another vague answer. I look up at the sky, training my vision on an illusion of the light.

"She had no reason to kill herself," I say finally. "She just wasn't able to fly."



.....and nothing heart.

Part II:
The First
Homicide Inquiry

2

殺人考察（前）



April 1995.

I met her.

/1

A cool breeze blows through the mansion, unexpected when it was just the end of summer. The wind carries tidings of autumn, and it makes me want to take an evening stroll again. I'm putting on my shoes, when a voice from behind me spoke.

"Lady *Shiki*, please do come home early this evening."

It is Akitaka, my servant. I ignore the impositions on his ever-monotonous voice, as always, and make my way out of the entrance hall. Past the courtyard, past the garden, and past the large gate barring entry into the house, and I'm finally out. Darkness lay beyond this point, there being no light outside the main grounds itself. There is neither sight nor sound of any person except for me.

It was midnight, and it would soon be the first day of September. The bamboo thickets surrounding the periphery of the mansion rustled in the light breeze, bringing to mind images of wicked monsters beyond them. Walks through uneasy silences such as these are the only thing I derive pleasure from.

As the night grows deeper, the darkness draws closer. I think I walk through this lifeless town because I want to be alone. Or perhaps because I want to think I'm alone. Either way, in this world, it'd be hard to be completely left alone anyway. But the city has its ways. I veer off from the main avenue, taking a detour through a narrow alleyway.

I turn sixteen this year. I'm a first year student at a private high school. It's kind of pointless, really. No matter what I do, the mansion and the dynasty is my future. I chose the school just because it was close to my house and it would cut down on my commute time, but looking back on it, that might have been a mistake.

The alley is dark, save for one streetlight flickering nervously like a beacon. It reminds me of someone.

I've been quite restless lately, even during these evening strolls. It's all because of that guy, who keeps popping up in my head whenever I least expect it, and whenever I least like it.

Being in high school didn't change anything. I couldn't grow close to anyone, and they couldn't grow close to me. I didn't know why exactly, but maybe it's because I easily express what I think in my behavior. That is to say, I'm a misanthrope. I couldn't come to like people ever since I was a child. Being a person, I never liked myself either. I didn't hate people, not really. It didn't stop them from thinking that way, though. It wasn't

long before my schoolmates got the picture, and within a month, people stopped trying to ingratiate themselves with me.

Not that I didn't like a quiet environment either, so that state of affairs suited me perfectly. But I should have known better than to think it would last. There is the one classmate who treated me like a friend, a person with a surname that sounded like a French poet. The one outstanding quality I can attribute to him: annoying. So very, very annoying.

I see the shadow of a person in the distant streetlight.

He pops into my mind again, him and his dumb smile.

Something about that man seemed strange.

I think back on it later.

Why?

I follow him into an alley.

Why did I have such a rush of excitement?

Inside the alley, it's like an entirely different world. The alley is a cul-de-sac, with the buildings forming walls all around it. Because of this, no sunlight shone upon it even on bright afternoons. Honestly, it looked more like a room than an alley. There was once one homeless person who lived in this dead space, but not today. The walls of this alley just got a brand new paint job. There is a wet, sticky quality to the ground, and the usual smell of rotten food is commingled with an even stronger scent.

All around me is a sea of blood. Bodily fluids seep and flow through the alley, and the sweet, sticky smell pierces my nostrils. In the center of it all is the corpse. Whatever face he donned in death can't be seen anymore. His arms were severed, and the legs became stumps around the knee area, pressurized blood pouring out of them.

A world so different, even the darkness of night was being overwhelmed by the bold crimson of blood. It made me so happy. Gracefully, elegantly, I touch the blood running on the ground, the sleeves of my light blue kimono turning a deep red. I streak the liquid on my lips, and a drop slips down lazily across my face. My body shakes in utter ecstasy, as if in a trance. The first lipstick I ever had.

I 2

As summer vacation draws to a close, a new semester of high school begins. Nothing really changes in life, least of all high school. The clothes of the students change to reflect the approaching cold of autumn, but apart from that small trifling thing, there is nothing else. The same old routine, day in and day out.

As for me, I've never worn anything other than a kimono my entire life. Akitaka tried to get me clothes "befitting a woman of my sixteen years", but I never even thought of putting them on. Lucky for me, then, that the school I go to allows you to wear anything you want, so I actually went to school in my traditional dress. Actually, I wanted to wear the formal style of kimono, but if I did that, I'd have to spend the entirety of P.E. just to change clothes (which may not be so bad), so I made a compromise with a one-layer yukata.

I did worry a bit about what to wear in the cold winter months, but a solution presented itself yesterday. During break time *he* approached me in his usual crude manner, asking if I felt cold.

"Not right now, no," I replied. "But perhaps in a few more weeks."

He frowned, as if reading my mind. "You're wearing that in the winter too?"

Wanting the conversation to end as quickly as possible, I answered directly. "Without fail. There's no need to worry yourself, however. I can wear something over it, after all."

"Wow, I didn't figure there was anything you could possibly wear over a kimono." With that, he walked away, puzzled at my answer. It was something I thought up at the moment, but not wanting to lie, I decided to buy a warm leather jacket. I'll wear it when winter comes, but for now, it stays in my closet.

And just like that, we ended up eating lunch together every day. He invited me, and I couldn't refuse out of politeness. We had our meals at the roof of the school building, where there were pairs of boys and girls just like us idling their lunch time.

Today's lunch break is just like any other, and I'm eyeing the other couples when he suddenly talks to me. I had already planned to ignore him, but he says something that I couldn't ignore.

"Murder. It happened on the last day of summer vacation. It was on the

western wing of the commercial district. There's an embargo on the media, though, so it hasn't been reported yet."

"...That isn't very nice, is it?" I say nervously.

"Yeah. It's a weird case, too. Apparently the suspect cut off the victim's hands and feet and left him there to die. The crime scene was a mess, and they had to cordon off the entire location. What's worse is that the suspect is still at large."

"You say the suspect cut off the arms and legs? Can people die from just that?"

"Blood loss would cause a lack of oxygen in the body, but in this case I'd say circulatory shock came first," he says while chewing his food. Outwardly, he looks like a calm, innocent young man, but in the end I suppose these are the sorts of things he really wants to talk about. I suppose one of his relatives is in the police force, or at least has connections there. Surely not too high a standing, however, else he wouldn't be leaking information out like this. "Oh, I'm sorry. I guess this has nothing to do with you, *Shiki*."

"It's quite alright...but Kokutō, this isn't really a meal time topic, don't you think?" I complain.

He offers only a simple nod in reply, barely even registering his faux pas. Good grief. Now, thanks to him, I can't stomach eating the tomato sandwich I just bought.

And so I capped off the end of summer and welcome the coming of autumn by hearing such a morbid rumor. The life that I thought would never change would soon receive a rude awakening.

It's been raining hard since morning. The clacking of my footsteps on the school corridor mixed with the pitter-patter sound of the raindrops. School has concluded for the day, and not a single soul could be found inside the grounds at this hour. Normally, there would still be students doing club activities, but the murder incident that Kokutō told me about had finally gone public, and club activities have since been temporarily suspended.

Akitaka told me in the drive to school earlier this morning that it had already reached four murders this month alone. That's what blew this wide open. The suspect remained as yet free from the law, and whatever personality, character, or motive he might have for doing this isn't yet known. In fact, marking the suspect as male might even be too hasty right now. There are no common points connecting the victims, except for the fact that they were all taking a walk quite late in the evening. It really is quite a different story when it's happening to your own city instead of some remote and far away town. Students stop hanging out after school and go home immediately, and everyone goes home in groups. The vise grip the murderer has on the city is so tangible I can almost touch it. Even I'm affected, since the police go on patrols at 9 o' clock in the evening. I can't even go out to do my nightly strolls.

"Four murders..." I whisper under my breath. Four times, I've...

"Ryōgi?" someone calls out suddenly. I turn towards the direction of the voice and see a man I don't recognize. He's wearing blue jeans and a white shirt, both of them quite plain and unsatisfactory. He must be someone in a higher grade level than me.

"Yes, that would be me. What is it?"

"Oh, please don't glare at me with those cold eyes of yours. Are you looking for Kokutō?"

What a foolish man. I could see right through his fake smile.

"I was about to go home. I have no idea how Kokutō factors into that."

"Is that so?" The drawl in his voice was practically audible at this point. "That's where you're wrong, and you know it. That's why you're irritated. It isn't good to take it out on someone else. It can be easier to blame anyone other than yourself. It's become a habit for you, hasn't it?" He chuckles at a joke funny only to himself, but continues. "Ryōgi... don't you think four times is a bit too much?"

"What?!" Inadvertently, I take a step back. The man smiles yet again, a satisfied smile I now realize looks similar to my own.

"I've wanted to talk to you for so long now. Now that I have, it's time to bid you farewell." After that, he walks away, the sound of his footsteps echoing in the dim, empty hall. It produced a vaguely disgusted feeling inside me. I don't even want look at him, so I head towards the school entrance.

After changing out of my school shoes, I head outside only to have the rain greet me. Akitaka, who was supposed to pick me up, evidently isn't here yet. On rainy days such as this one, he would always come by to give me a ride, but he is obviously late. I'm too lazy to bother changing shoes again, so I decide to take shelter from the rain in the shade of the entryway.

The rain looks faintly like a veil, and it makes the campus grounds look as if they were encased by fog. The winter chill makes the pale whiteness of my breath visible.

I don't know how much time passed by, but before I could notice, Kokutō had appeared at my side.

"I have an umbrella," he says awkwardly.

"It's alright. I have someone picking me up. You should hurry up and head home," I urge.

"In a moment. I thought I'd stay here until your driver got here. If that isn't too much trouble?"

Without waiting for me to answer, he leans against the concrete wall of the entrance. I wasn't thinking on what Kokutō was going to say or about to say. In fact, I planned on systematically ignoring him until such time that I could leave.

A miracle. He's actually quiet for once. I can only hear the sound of the falling raindrops. Kokutō wasn't talking at all. I turned to him only to see that, with a satisfied look on his face, he had already closed his eyes. I thought that he was sleeping, as unlikely as that may be, but I hear him singing under his breath. I know it was a famous song, but I couldn't remember the title.

Truly a miracle. Much later when I got home, I asked Akitaka what the song was, and it turned out to be "Singing in the Rain."

Kokutō didn't speak. We weren't even a meter apart. For us to be this close and not talking made me a bit unsettled. It was an awkward situation, but the silence wasn't at all painful. Strange. Why was this silence calming? But then the silence frightened me, as suddenly as I warmed to it. Instinct raced in my mind, telling me that if it stayed like this, *he* would come out.

"KOKUTŌ!"

"Yes?!"

With a jump, he opens his eyes and stands straight.

"What happened? Is something wrong?" he says while looking at me oddly. I see myself reflected in his eyes. Looking at each other like that, it was probably the first time I really saw Mikiya Kokutō, still just a boy, with a boy's face, and a gentle disposition. He had black hair which he didn't style in any particular way, and similarly black eyes, where he wore stupid glasses that even little children would find atrocious. He wore no accessories, and his only concession to fashion was his insistence on wearing an all-black ensemble all the time. It has always puzzled me why he always gave a mind to anything I did.

"Where..." I look down, trying my damndest to think that the ground is the most interesting in the world. "Where were you before you came out here?"

"In the student council room. One of our upperclassmen is dropping out of school, and we held something like a farewell party for him. His name's Lio Shirazumi. He said he's dropping out because he found something he wanted to do. It surprised me, seeing as he was one of those quiet, un-social types." Lio Shirazumi. I can't say I've heard of the person. But Kokutō knows a lot of people I don't. The class sees him as a friend to everyone, and he has some small popularity with the female upperclassman population.

"I invited you too, didn't I? I told you when we said goodbye to each other yesterday, but you never showed up in the student council room. I looked for you in the classroom, but there was no one there."

He did indeed invite me, but I would've just spoiled the mood by going there. That, and I thought Kokutō inviting me was just him being his usual polite self. He didn't really expect me to go...did he?

"Oh, so you were serious?"

"Of course I was! What did you think, *Shiki*?" Kokutō, understandably, gets mad, not because of what I said but what I thought he said. I've never really experienced someone being angry at me, and it confuses me. From that moment on I sink into silence and wait with my mouth shut. I don't think there's ever been a day that I wanted Akitaka to come quickly as badly as this one. Not long thereafter, the car entered the front gate, and I say an awkward goodbye to Kokutō.

When the sun began to set, and it grew darker and darker, the rain finally stopped. Putting on my red leather blouson, I head outside to clear my head. The night sky overhead is in turmoil. The clouds that blanketed the sky only occasionally gave way to the moon and the stars. In the city,

policemen in uniform and plainclothes alike patrolled the streets, and I made my way to the riverbank in hopes of avoiding them.

Wet asphalt reflects the dim glow of the streetlights. From afar, I hear the menacing metallic rumbling of a train. That means the train viaduct is near. Almost arbitrarily, I decide to head towards that direction, but I stop short upon reaching it when I see someone there.

Slowly and purposefully, I approach.

Another train passes overhead, probably tonight's last ride. The noise is louder this time, since I'm closer, and it sounds like rolling thunder. The rumble reverberates as loudly as if I was in a sealed room, and I have to cover my ears if I don't want to go deaf. After the train passes, however, a solemn sort of silence descends under the viaduct.

Without streetlight or moonlight, this place is in complete darkness. That might be for the best. Red liquid is spread all around the riverbank, yet even this is almost black because of the lack of light. This would be the fifth. The weeds around here are overgrown, but the corpse it surrounds looks like a single solitary flower, red and artificial. The face is at the center, with dismembered arms and legs surrounding it, twisted to look like flower petals, or a manji cross.

I'm starting to get used to this. I gulp, and I realize my throat is dry. Is it tension, or arousal, I wonder? My thirst burns my throat, but it doesn't matter. This place is pregnant with death, and I smile wordlessly in spite of myself. The thirst turns into screaming ecstasy inside of me, the pleasure almost too overwhelming, but I manage to hold it back. I gaze upon the beautiful corpse once more, and feel for once that I am truly alive.

14

At the beginning of each month, it is customary in the Ryōgi dynasty for the head of the family and the heir to have a sword duel with live steel. In the past, different swordmasters would be invited to participate in the duel, and to teach their craft. But then, tiring of such acts, one of my ancestors stopped this practice long ago, and created within the manor his own school of swordsmanship. Into such a tradition was I born, and even a girl of the Ryōgi dynasty must bear a certain standard with the sword.

My father was a strong man, and skillful with his weapon. In our duel, he made the sword dance like no other, and easily overpowered me. It is this disparity in skill and strength that has just made me lose the duel. After this, I waste no time in returning to the main building of the manor, which lies a fair bit of distance away from the dōjo. The wooden floor of the compound is immaculately treated, and makes no sound as my feet tread upon it.

On the way, I see Akitaka standing in a corridor waiting for me. Ten years my senior, Akitaka is the servant assigned to me by the household since my childhood days. He is a dutiful and patient man, especially with me. He's probably waiting on me so he can change me out of my sweat-soaked clothes.

"You fought a close duel today. How is your father?"

"Goddamit, Akitaka, stop shadowing me all the time. I can at least change by myself. It's not like we're joined at the hip. You'd be better served sucking up to my brother, you know that? Males succeed the dynasty, after all."

Despite my rudeness, Akitaka smiles. "You are quite wrong, my lady. There is no successor to the dynasty but you, for you are the only one that inherited the gift."

The statement elicits a small chuckle from me. "A gift, is it? What I have, Akitaka, is a curse."

Leaving Akitaka in the corridor, I continue to head toward the main building. Once I reach my room, I instinctively lock the door shut and immediately undress my training garments. I steal a glance of myself in the mirror, at the body of a sixteen year old girl. Actually, I only need to put in a little effort to make my face look like a guy, but I can't cheat that way with the rest of my body. The body that continues to grow, month after month, year after year...the body that **Shiki** detests more and more with each passing day.

"It might have been better for me to be a guy," I say to no one in particu-

lar. No one is listening, except for me. Except for him. The one inside me called **Shiki**.

All descendants of our clan are given two different names, two different logograms, though with the same pronunciation. There is the masculine name, which belongs to yang, the positive. And then the feminine name, which belongs to yin, the negative. As I was born a girl, I am *Shiki*. Had I been a boy, I would have been named **Shiki**. The reason we undertake such a peculiar practice is simple to understand. The descendants of the Ryōgi dynasty have a high chance of inheriting dissociative identity disorder, what most people would know as a split personality...in other words, someone like me.

My father once said that ours was a dynasty blessed, a state of grace that only few know. He also said it was a curse. He got the “curse” part right, at least. This isn’t a state of grace by any stretch of the imagination. It is, quite simply, an abnormality. Fortunately, I’m the first in a long time to successfully inherit the curse. Unfortunately, that only means that a lot of my relatives ended up in asylums before they were even old enough to understand what that meant. Having two personalities breaks most people eventually. The difference between dream and consciousness, the boundary between your memory and the other’s becomes blurred, and one so afflicted soon turns to suicide. But I was different. I didn’t become insane like the others...and so I was trained by the family.

I like to think it’s because me and **Shiki** ignore each other. To me, **Shiki** is just another personality, one I switch to when I need it, and we exist simultaneously, aware of each other. In the duel between me and my father, I needed his aggressiveness, so I used him. But I am in control. Altogether, it’s a bit different from what people usually call a split personality. I am *Shiki*, but at the same time, I am also **Shiki**.

Father was proud, proud to have actually spawned a proper heir to the dynasty in his generation. My older brother was cast aside in the line of succession, and I took his place. And really, I’m fine with that. I don’t bite the hand that feeds me. And I don’t mind living this poor excuse for a normal life. Not like I have any choice in the matter. Even if, say, **Shiki** turns into a cold-blooded killer, I can’t make him go away. There will always be something called “Shiki” inside of me, and in the end, both of us are the same. No more and no less.

The First Homicide Inquiry - I

"So it's true then? You and the Ryōgi girl have hooked up?"

I almost turn the coffee milk in my mouth into a projectile at what Gakuto just said. I go into a coughing fit after almost choking on the damn thing, but it does give me a scant few seconds to scan the classroom for anyone who heard that. Everyone seems to be busy minding their own lunchtime business.

"What do you mean?" I finally manage to say after gulping down my drink.

"Don't be playin' dumb with me." Gakuto's face looks like he wants to shift the blame away from himself. "It ain't no secret that you've been eyeing Ryōgi. Matter of fact, judging from the reaction you just made, seems the only ones who ain't wise to it are the both of you."

I can't see myself so I can't really say, but I think I might inadvertently be making the most disappointed frown I've ever made in my life.

The increasingly frigid winds and rapidly decreasing temperature signal November and the advent of winter, meaning that it's been seven months since I first met *Shiki*. The time and our tendency to hang out together must have given people the wrong impression.

"I'm sorry to say that you have been misinformed," I finally say. "We're just friends, if you could even call it that."

"That a fact?" His continued disbelief exasperates me. That Gakuto's parents stuck him with a name meaning "man of learning" is the textbook definition of irony. It goes against his thick-headedness and his entire tendency to gravitate towards sports and less towards academically inclined pursuits. His status as the pride of the jūdō team attested to that more than anything. Despite our seeming incompatibility, we've struck a friendship that started way back in grade school that somehow sticks to this day. "You're on a first name basis, though," he continues. "She don't seem like the kind of broad to just let that go without a warning."

"*Shiki* really hates being called by her last name, though. I called her 'Ryōgi' one time just to see what happened, and she gave me a look as if I just killed her pet dog or something. She insisted that I not be formal with her, so I ended up just calling her by her first name. Pretty boring, huh?"

"Yeah, I guess so," he finally concedes after a sigh and a five second delay. He looks really disappointed, leaving me to wonder what kind of crazy story he was expecting. "Then your rendezvous last week at the school entrance wasn't a thing, either? This is a waste of time man, talking

to you expecting details. Shoulda just shut up and ate my lunch back in the classroom."

"Wait, back it up. How the hell do you know about last week?"

"I told you, boy, you and Ryōgi are famous. Mostly because of Ryōgi, but whatever. Your rainy day get-together was this morning's hallway talk. Since it's about Ryōgi, every mouth in this damn school been talking."

I let out a frustrated sigh and cast a gloomy look at the sky, silently praying that this mess doesn't reach *Shiki*'s ears. She'd kill me.

"They say this school has a lot of college entrants that turn out well, don't they? I'm starting to wonder if people here really are that smart," I blurt out half-jokingly.

"Well, if it's any consolation, at least some of the upperclassmen got work out of this here school," he replies matter-of-factly. I'm about to make another joke at the expense of the school's administration and curriculum when Gakuto chimes in again. "Seriously, though, there's one thing that don't sit right with me: of all the fine girls in this school, why Ryōgi? Which-ever way you wanna spin it, it just don't seem at all like you."

I recall being told something similar by one of my friends in the higher year level. I was told a more down-to-earth girl would suit me more, with the not-so-subtle hint that *Shiki* was altogether too strange. The words are different but I recognize the same sort of subtle insinuation in what Gakuto just said, and it makes me a little angry.

"Oh, come off it. *Shiki* isn't as scary as you make her out to be," I say inadvertently. Gakuto suddenly makes a huge, stupid grin, as if finally claiming some elusive prize.

"Just a friend,' huh? Easy, man, no need to raise your voice at me. Just curious, is all. Scary chicks like that don't come a dime a dozen, you feel me? You not seeing how cold she is just means you already crazy for her."

He must mean "hard-headed and obstinate" when he says "cold", because that's the only way I'd describe *Shiki*. I know Gakuto's right, so only with reluctance do I finally concede.

"I know, alright? Okay, you got me, Christ."

"Then what part of her do you like? Her looks? What?" I have no idea what's motivating him and his drive to ask every single detailed question. Well, it's clear that *Shiki* is good looking, no doubt about it. But that's not what really draws me to her. *Shiki* always looks like she's hiding some invisible wound, some fragile part of her that's on the verge of breaking and eating her from the inside out, killing her slowly. You see the emptiness in her face, her thousand-yard stare, and you realize it isn't just some convenient metaphor; it's real, somehow, and she needs help. I don't want to see

her get hurt.

"Well, she does have her cute sides," I venture hesitantly. "If I were to compare her to an animal, she'd be a rabbit I guess." As soon as I say that, I regret it immediately. It's a big hit with Gakuto, however, who laughs heartily upon hearing it almost reflexively.

"A rabbit? Man, that ain't even half right and you know it. If she were an animal, she'd be a hawk that can claw the shit outta your eyes, or some shit like that. A rabbit is just..." he tries to find his words amid bouts of laughter. "...just too far off the scale. Or wait, wait. Maybe she's the kind of bird that dies from loneliness?" Another huge laugh.

"That's it. I'm not talking to you about girls anymore."

All of a sudden, Gakuto's laughter stops. "Know what? A rabbit might've been a good comparison after all."

Now it is my turn to laugh, though I manage to suppress the urge. "Gakuto, an about-face that quick is pretty suspicious, don't you think?"

"Nah, nah, it ain't about that. I just remembered that there're rabbits that can bite your head off if you're not careful, man."

After thinking on it perhaps a moment longer than I should have, I respond. "Bullshit."

"Boy, of course it's bullshit," Gakuto says, stretching his arms and leaning back on his seat. "I'm talking 'bout video games, man."

The First Homicide Inquiry - II

On the day the finals for the second quarter ended, I saw a very unusual thing.

Inside my desk was a letter, which automatically makes it a bit weird, but it didn't end there. It was the content of the letter and its sender that surprised me. It was *Shiki* brazenly asking me out on a date. The letter said something simple like "take me out on a date, will ya?", but something about it was vaguely threatening, almost like an ultimatum.

I came home that day, not knowing what to make of what I just read. I waited for the next day to come, with all the dread of a samurai who had just been ordered to commit seppuku the first thing in the morning.

I've been waiting for what must have been an hour in the place *Shiki* designated: the statue of the dog Hachikō in front of the train station, when I finally see her walking towards me from quite a bit away. The first thing I notice is that she's wearing a different colored kimono today, the color of autumn leaves. It actually goes well with her bright red jacket. Though I see *Shiki* almost every day, I've never really noticed how small she is, looking at her from this distance. The walk that animates her makes her features look distant and cold, and yet she carries herself with dignity and grace; a contradiction not unlike the one you would find on a puppet, a puppet almost alive in its appearance, and yet ultimately dead.

"Yo, Kokutō. Been waiting long? My bad, man. Losing Akitaka was a pain in the ass."

The second thing I notice is that she pronounces my name weird, and I get the feeling she's referencing some long-dead French poet with it. And that's not even going into the way she's talking now. It leaves me stunned for a second, and I look at her a bit too long, as if to confirm whether it really is *Shiki* or some sort of elaborate but dumb prank by Gakuto.

"What, being an hour late is a cardinal sin now?" *Shiki* says. She must have noticed my mouth now hanging half-open. "Unclenching your ass some would do you wonders, my friend." *Shiki*'s black eyes stare at me weirdly. The same eyes that always looked like they were staring at something far off, even during the first time we met on that snowy day.

"Um, I—I just wanna check," I stutter, laughing in my head as I do so. "You're *Shiki*, right?"

She raises an eyebrow at me. "You were expecting maybe the school

principal?" *Shiki* laughs, leaving a suspended grin on her face afterwards. "Well, time's a-wastin'. I'm not good at this, so I'm gonna have to leave it to you where we go."

She then grabs my arm in a solid grip and starts to walk. Making a mockery of her final statement, she strings me along by the arm across a variety of specialty stores, never really buying anything, but moving on to a new shop after she gets bored. I try reasoning with her, see if she wanted to go to a movie or a coffee shop to take a breather, but she parries with an immediate and resounding "No." She's probably right, anyway. Going to such boring places wouldn't fit *Shiki*'s character now.

She talked. A lot. Quite a contrast to the usually quiet *Shiki* I knew. It's like she's high or something. Most of the stores we visit are clothing stores. Given the state she's in right now, it made me breathe a sigh of relief that she's still going to women's clothing stores. Finally, after four hours of keeping up with *Shiki*, she says she wants to eat, and so after much wandering, she decides on a fast food store.

The second we go inside the restaurant *Shiki* attracts attention with her ridiculously out of place kimono, but she doesn't seem to mind. As she places her jacket on her seat and sits down, I decide to ask her the obvious.

"So, is this the way you normally talk out of school, *Shiki*?"

"Only in my case," she says in between furious chewing of hamburger chunks. It looks like she doesn't like it. "But really, how you talk means absolutely nothing. I mean, you could change how you talk right now and you'd still be the same guy, right?" *Shiki* finishes the hamburger in seconds. "I'm sure I've got you absolutely confused right about now."

She has no idea.

"I guess I have some explaining to do. This is the first time you've seen me after all. I've been quiet until now because me and *Shiki* were on the same wavelength on this one."

The words are going in, but I don't understand what she's saying at all.

"It's what you would call a split personality. I'm **Shiki**, and the one you usually see is *Shiki*. But don't get me wrong, we're not like different people or anything. *Shiki* Ryōgi has always been one person. The only difference between us is our priorities."

While she says this, she puts a wet finger to a paper napkin, writing her two names, with two differing characters but the same pronunciation. One **Shiki** that means "weave". Another *Shiki* that means "ritual".

"I just wanted to give you a friendly neighborhood chat, is all. *Shiki* wasn't keen on the idea, so I took over in her place. You get me?"

"...suppose so," I answer uneasily. The truth is that I really do sort of

get it, when I think about the time we met at the school orientation. We'd met before that, but when we talked at the orientation, she said she didn't know anything about it. I thought it was because she hated me or some other similar reason, but I guess now I can kind of understand.

Being with her for half the day, I come to understand there really isn't so big a difference between today's **Shiki** and the *Shiki* I supposedly know. Like she says, she talks differently, but the way she moves is the same. So much the same, in fact, that doubting the veracity of what she says seems now a foolish notion.

"But why tell me?" I say.

"Figured it's only a matter of time before you knew." She takes a sip from her juice but immediately puts it down. She doesn't really like cold things.

"I'm what you would call *Shiki's* destructive impulse. I represent the things she wants to do the most. But until now there's no one I could direct this impulse at. *Shiki* had no real interest in anyone." She mentions this with disinterest and just a tinge of regret, as if dreading the fact that she had to say it at all. She keeps looking at me seriously, and I'm afraid of what she'll do should I move.

"You can relax, man. I'm still myself, and I'm just being a mouthpiece for what *Shiki* thinks right now. I'm not gonna go Charles Whitman on you." There is a pause for a moment, as her face grows more stern, as if to presage the saying of something important. "Though...we are beginning to be out of sync, so I'd take myself with just a little grain of salt, if I were you."

"'Out of sync?' Does that mean you and *Shiki* got in a fight?"

"I like how you think someone can have a fight with himself. But no, not like that. See, whatever I do, it has to be something we both want. *Shiki's* at the helm here, so meeting you was a mutual decision. She probably would have gone about it entirely different, though. It's not really in her to just go out and take you on a date. You can thank me for that one." I nod without really thinking, focusing more on what she's saying, partly because it's interesting, and partly because I can't take in half of what she's saying. **Shiki** laughs. "See, I like that about you. *Shiki* thinks otherwise. That's what I mean when I say out of sync."

The way she worded it, I don't know if *Shiki* doesn't like that I don't give it much thought, or if *Shiki* doesn't like that Shiki likes me. I'd like to believe it's the latter though, for the sake of my pride at the very least. Quite abruptly, **Shiki** stands up, and puts the money for the food she ate on the table.

"Well, guess that's about it. Let's call it a day."

Putting her jacket on, she makes her way to the door with a happy skip

in her walk, leaving with only one thing to say:

“You’re all right, man. I like you, so we’ll see each other real soon.”

After parting with **Shiki**, I start to make my way home. Once I reach the street, I’m surprised to see the city being bathed with the warm glow of sunset. Though it’s still a relatively early time, there’s a lot less people in the main road than usual thanks to the recent murders.

I must be tired after talking (not to mention window shopping) with **Shiki** for that long, so I make my way inside my house with only a cursory greeting to my parents. I was planning to inhabit the kotatsu for a good warm nap, only to find my cousin Daisuke, a frequent visitor and a good friend, had already usurped the table. Wordlessly, we initiate a battle for the warm table, struggling with our legs to gain the most ground. In the end, however, I am no match for him, and while he lies down, half his body being warmed by the kotatsu, I end up having to stand up.

“You must be busy these days, Daisuke,” I say while eating some of the oranges on top of the table, resignation clear in my voice.

“Yeah, real busy, what with five murders in three months. Sorry for crashing in your house like this. Figured your dad’s house was closer to the police station, and I only get one hour of R&R before I need to get back, so going home would have been a waste of time.”

My cousin Daisuke is a homicide detective in the city police, an irony since he’s “kind of a lazy guy.” His words, not mine. Why the department would put a man so unfit for the position of solving crime is a mystery not even he can solve. He’s my go-to source for all of the crime related stuff that happens, a convenience that seems to be proving its worth with every passing day.

“How’s the search going?” I ask.

“Baby steps. We were pretty hard up for leads, but in this fifth vic, the suspect finally threw us a bone, even if it does seem intentional.” Daisuke sits up and faces me, a grim look on his worn out and sleep-deprived face. “What I’m about to tell you is confidential, Mikiya. You’re not entirely unrelated to this, so listen up. I told you about the first vic, right?”

Daisuke then proceeds to describe the situation with the second and third victims. While hoping that not all policemen in the country are this loose-tongued, I listen to his story. The second victim was vertically sliced in half from the crotch to the head. Murder weapon unknown. One of the halves was stuck to the wall.

The third victim had his limbs cut off, and the arms sewn to the legs. The

fourth was cut into pieces, with what looked like a symbol or some other marking left on the body. The fifth was arranged such that the arms and legs formed a manji symbol.

"Obviously someone with some sort of mental disorder," I say, trying to hold back the growing sickness in my stomach.

"Too obvious, though. This guy has some sort of point to make here. What do you think?"

"Hmm. I don't think there's any meaning in them all being killed by a cutting weapon. Other than that, I don't know. But..."

"But?"

"He's getting used to it. All the victims until now have been outside. The next one might be a break and enter job."

Daisuke puts a hand on his temple. I really do pity the stress this job, and heck, this case is giving him. I know he's barely had any time to himself. "There's no motive, no pattern," he observes. "And he might try going inside houses next if he doesn't find anyone outside to kill. I hope the brass gets the same read on this guy and have some sort of plan for it. Probably not, though."

He closes his eyes, right hand still resting on his head, nursing an invisible wound. "As for why I told you all of this...we found this in the fifth crime scene. Suspect probably dropped it." He produces a small plastic bag from his pocket; the kind used to preserve evidence, and inside is our school emblem. We have to stick it somewhere in our clothes when we go to school.

"The area had a lot of vegetation, so the suspect might not have noticed that he dropped this. Or it could have been intentional, some sort of message. I don't know. But it's the only lead I got. I might be paying your school a visit in a few days," Daisuke says, almost like a premonition for an ill omen.

The First Homicide Inquiry - III

Before anyone could grow comfortable or complacent with it, winter vacation ends. The only special thing that happened during that time was that I made the customary visit to the shrine on New Year's with *Shiki*, but other than that, there was nothing else of note.

As the third term starts, *Shiki* starts to isolate herself even more. Even I could tell she was trying to stay away from other people as much as possible. After school, she likes to look out the window when everyone else has left, but it would always be **Shiki** that waits, just like today. I keep her company, even though she hasn't said that she wants me to. She needs it, I think.

The winter evenings come earlier, and the sunset that heralds it bathes the classroom in a deep red light. The bright light makes the shadows that play across the classroom's walls even darker, and **Shiki's** shadow is no exception. She leans against the window before she begins to talk.

"Say, Kokutō. Did I ever tell you that I hate people?"

"Not really." I reply with the tone that implies skepticism at where this topic is going.

"Well, congratulations, now you know. *Shiki's* a misanthrope, been one since she was a kid. See, when you're a kid, you don't know nothing yet, right? You think every random Joe you meet on the street loves ya, just like that. I mean, you love yourself, so it's common sense that they must like you too, right?"

"I suppose. When you're a kid, you still trust everyone. When you're a kid, you're scared of ghosts. When you grow up, you get scared of other people."

"Right. But that ignorance is what's really important, Kokutō. It never occurs to you that your best friend could be a murderer, or that your neighbor could be killing puppies in his spare time. You don't suspect. And since you don't know anything, other people will accept you. And no matter how fake that is, it's important, since you'll be able to love other people too. People can only express the emotions they know, after all."

The sunset paints her face red, and her eyes acquire that peculiar gaze of hers, reminiscent of the kind of casual, perhaps feigned disdain of a predator hiding its intentions from its prey. Right now, I can't tell which *Shiki* she currently is. Maybe it doesn't even matter.

"But it was different for me. Since the day I was born, *Shiki* had me inside of her, so she already knew of other people. I didn't love her, and

so she learned that it was possible for people not to love. Ever since she was a kid, she learned how ugly people can be on the inside, and so she couldn't love other people. In time, that tempered to rejection, and then disinterest."

"And that's how I grew to dislike people," her eyes seemed to conclude. "But weren't you lonely like that?" I muse.

"Why would I be? *Shiki* has me, doesn't she? She was isolated from society, sure, but alone? Never." She tries her best to look like she really means it. "But lately," she continues, "*Shiki* has been acting kinda weird. She's been trying harder and harder to deny her abnormality. Denial is what I do. She's only supposed to affirm." **Shiki** laughs bitterly at their private joke, her sinister smile betraying the brutality beneath.

"Kokutō, have you ever wanted to kill someone?"

At that moment, the sun shone in a peculiar way, making her face take on a deep, crimson, almost blood-stained look, and it made my heart jump.

"Not really, no. Probably the furthest I've ever thought in that vein is wanting to punch someone."

"I see. But for me, that desire is all I have," she declares, as her voice echoes across the empty classroom, now lit by a burning red sun.

"What do you mean?"

"All the things that *Shiki* really wants to do, all the things she holds back, I welcome with open arms. It's my sole meaning and purpose, and it doesn't make me unhappy at all to know that. And that's why *Shiki* has always tried to suppress me. She always tries to kill the black stain in her that's called **Shiki**. I've killed myself, over and over and over again. I told you, right? 'People can only express the emotions they know?' Well, the only emotion I've ever experienced...is murder."

She finally stands up from the windowsill, and without making so much as a sound, draws closer to me, and in that moment, I feel fear, genuine fear, in my heart.

"And that's why, Kokutō, *Shiki's* definition of murder," she pauses and leans close to my ear, her murmur as audible as a shout, "is killing *me*. She kills anything that makes me want to come out."

And with her prankster smile grimly signaling the end of the conversation, **Shiki** leaves the classroom.

The day after, I try to pretend as if nothing happened. I go about the motions as usual, and of course this includes inviting *Shiki* to eat lunch together.

"Wanna grab a bite with me?"

"What...in the..." Her face betrays surprise, a face I've yet to see her put on until now, and yet with her voice wavering, she reluctantly accepts, perhaps to preserve routine more than anything.

Shiki always liked going to the roof, and so we head there. We climb the stairs, with *Shiki* choosing to remain silent, but I knew her pointed stare of surprise and anger is boring a hole in my back. I know the reason why she's mad. Even I could read between the lines of what **Shiki** said yesterday. But it's not like she hasn't unconsciously been sending signals for me to back off, and I just take it as business as usual.

When I open the door to the roof, we find that we're all alone. It seems that we're the only ones that want to eat lunch under the cold late-January sky.

"Man, it's cold," I say. "Wanna go somewhere else?"

"I'm alright. If you want to eat somewhere else, however, then you are welcome to do so."

As always, her sarcasm-drenched politeness doesn't really bother me. We sit beside the wall to avoid the chill of the wind, with me already having finished two sandwiches. *Shiki* hasn't even touched hers.

"*Why are you even talking to me?*" *Shiki* murmured something almost inaudible even in this deserted rooftop, and it was so sudden I wasn't able to hear it clearly.

"You said something, *Shiki*?"

"I said, why are you so thoughtless?" she says while fixing me with the same angry glare she had on earlier.

"Oh, come on. I've been called 'honest to a fault' many times before, but never 'thoughtless.'"

"Then everyone's been going easy on you," she says, sounding convinced. *Shiki* finally breaks open the wrapping on her egg sandwich; the sound of the crunching plastic seal echoed in the empty rooftop. The noise was fitting somehow. *Shiki* sits silently now while eating her sandwich in small, deliberate chunks, and as I'm already done, I'm just sort of idling. I can practically feel the wave of angered expectation she's generating, so I try to break it by starting the conversation that had been in the air since I asked her to eat lunch with me.

"*Shiki*, I'm sure you're a little mad at me..."

"A little?!"

Her eyes stare needle point daggers at me. It's what I get for just saying what comes to mind, but this subject needed to be broached sooner or later anyway.

"God, you're annoying," *Shiki* sighs. "I have no idea why you still choose to associate yourself with me after all that I've shown you and all that **Shiki** said to you yesterday."

"I don't know why either," I shrug lightly. "Being with you is kinda fun, but if you asked me why, I wouldn't know what to say."

"Kokutō, you *do* understand that I'm abnormal, right?"

There's nothing I can do but nod. Her split personality (or whatever it is) obviously makes her some variety of odd. "Of course I do."

"Then why aren't you getting it? I'm not someone you can just walk up to everyday and expect to hang out normally with."

"Does it really matter if you're normal or not?"

That statement made for *Shiki*'s second surprised face of the day. She looks at me straight and unmoving, so much that I thought that she might have even stopped breathing.

"But...I can't be anything like you," *Shiki* says. She brushes a hand on her hair, making the sleeve of her kimono slide down to reveal a bandage wrapped around her slender right arm, just around the elbow. It looks like it's only been recently applied.

"*Shiki*, that wound—"

Abruptly, *Shiki* stands up before I can finish my sentence. She avoids looking at me, deliberately staring at some far off place.

"If **Shiki**'s words aren't getting through to you, then allow me to elucidate on them," she says. "If this goes on, I will kill you."

Now it was my turn to be surprised. I could muster no reply. Without even throwing away the plastic wrapping of her egg sandwich, *Shiki* leaves the roof and returns to the classroom. Left alone, I clean up the trash we both left behind.

"Now I've really done it. It's just like Gakuto said." It was all I could end up saying to myself. Because just like Gakuto said, I might really be an idiot. I couldn't bring myself to hate *Shiki*, even after what she said. In fact, I think my mind just cleared up on the matter. At this point, there's only one reason why I like being with *Shiki*.

"I've become crazy a long time ago." If only I had realized it sooner.

If only I had realized that I like *Shiki* Ryōgi so much, that I can laugh at being told about my eventual murder.

The First Homicide Inquiry - IV

I wake up to a perfectly good Sunday morning, the first Sunday of February in fact. After washing my face and brushing my teeth, I head to the dining room, and am surprised to find Daisuke there, waiting for me.

"Why are you here?" I ask, in the manner of my usual morning crankiness.

"Well, good morning to you, too. I missed the last train, so I came over for a while. I gotta go to work in a while, though. Savor school life while you've got it, Mikiya. When you grow up, working harder just translates to less vacations." A yawn punctuates the last word in his sentence. His drooping shoulders and tired voice tell me just how much sleep he's been getting. That only means two things: the investigation on the serial killer has either ground to a solid halt or they've gotten a new lead.

"Oh yeah, you were talking about coming to my school last time we talked. Did anything come of that?"

"Nothing, really. Lots of people lose school emblems, after all, and testing it turned up nothing on the offender database. But it might be back to your school for me." He sighs, rubbing his eyes. "Truth is, a sixth body turned up three days ago. Signs of a struggle this time, which was different. The victim had long nails, and she probably clawed at her killer. Found about three centimeters of skin beneath the vic's nails."

Now this was surprising. I haven't even heard about this on the TV or the papers. Yet, even in the face of such grim news, my mind couldn't help but drift off to *Shiki* and the conversation we had recently. She'd been talking about murder as well. A picture forms in my mind, of *Shiki* standing atop a bloody corpse, holding a knife...

"So that means the killer was wounded?" I blurt out.

"Um, yeah? Unless the victim was scratching her own damn self. Lab team thinks the skin is from the elbow, so I'd expect the killer's nursing some pretty deep wounds thereabouts. The blood is being analyzed, and if it gets a match on the database, it's checkmate."

Daisuke stands up after that, says a quick goodbye, and leaves. I suddenly find myself without the power to stand up, and I collapse on one of the chairs. It was only three days ago when I talked with Shiki in the sunset-lit classroom, and the day after that, I could've sworn there was a fresh bandage on her elbow.

Past noon, I make up my mind. Just thinking and worrying about it isn't going to do any good, so I figure if I ask *Shiki* herself, and she tells me she has nothing to do with the killings, then that'll be enough. At the very least, it'll do something to calm my nerves.

I rifle through my school's student registry book, and find *Shiki*'s name and home address a few moments later. Her house is on the outskirts of town, and when I finally find it, the better part of the night had caught up with me. The Ryōgi estate's periphery is populated by bamboo trees in every direction, a veritable forest, and the estate itself is built like an old 18th century mansion. The walls surrounding the grounds went on for so long, I don't think I could have guessed the size of the place just by walking. I would've needed an airplane to get a better picture.

A path leads me through the bamboo forest to a large gate. The entire thing looks like a relic left over from the Edo era, but despite this, I find an intercom beside the gate, a little anachronistic quality that gives me some small relief. I push the button and state my business, and in under a minute, a black-suited man opens the gates and comes out to greet me. He looks like he's in his early thirties, and seems about as high-spirited as a ghost would be.

"Welcome, young man." he says with impeccably practiced politeness. "My name is Akitaka, a servant of the Ryōgi household and of the lady *Shiki*. Unfortunately, the lady is absent now and cannot meet you. If you would like, you may enter the mansion and await her return."

"Er...no, thanks. I think I'll just come back another time."

Truth is, I don't think I have the courage to go inside the mansion alone.

"As you wish. Goodbye, then."

He goes inside the gates again, and it closes behind him with a sound of finality. Because it's already dark, I decide to go home for today. I keep thinking about *Shiki*, and what she could be doing at such a late hour. I decide not to assume the worst. It's the easiest way to a slippery slope of crippling anxiety.

The walk to the station takes me an hour, but right at the station entrance I meet my former upperclassman. He invites me to dinner in a restaurant, and, not being one to refuse, I go with him. We end up talking until the hour hand of my watch is pointed at ten o' clock. Unlike my friend, I'm still a student, so I needed to get going soon. After saying goodbye to him, I buy a ticket for the train inside the station. The hour hand of my watch is creeping closer and closer to 11, but before I put the ticket on the turnstile, I allow myself to wonder, for a moment, if *Shiki* was home already.

"God, what the hell am I doing here?" I say to myself, while walking through the unfamiliar residential neighborhood. The streets are empty with no signs of life, unsurprising given the hour and the circumstances, but I tried to pay it no heed; *Shiki*'s house was nearby. I know I won't be able to meet her now even if I went there. But still, I just want to see the lights on in her house, in her room, just to know that she's there, so I'm taking this short side trip back to the Ryōgi estate.

The freezing winter air puts a strain on my shoulder muscles, and my ragged breath is keenly audible in the still night. Soon, the residential district is behind me and I face the tree line of the bamboo forest surrounding the Ryōgi estate for the second time tonight. The trees part for the little path that goes towards the front gate. No wind sings through the trees at this hour, and no light but the moon's illuminates the path; far from making the forest less menacing, the silence only serves to accentuate my anxiety.

I wonder what would happen if I got attacked here. As soon as the thought enters my mind, I regret it immediately. Though I was only half-joking with myself, my brain is now working overtime to exaggerate the fleeting image, even as I try to put it out of my mind. When I was little, I was afraid of monsters. I mistook the silhouettes flitting to and fro in the midst of the bamboo trees for ghosts and other horrors. But now, I'm scared of other people, people who you imagine will just jump out from behind the brush and attack you. What age was I when I started to replace the ghosts with people?

Every step I take worsens the thought in my head, and I keep remembering the terrible image I saw when Daisuke told me about the recent murder. And while I try to exorcise that disturbing thought, I come across something in the path that makes my feet stop of their own volition.

A few meters ahead, a white shadow of a person was standing. Her kimono is so white it seemed as if to shine in the moonlight, but it is speckled and sullied with something, and it continues to spread over the kimono's surface. Something in front of her is spraying red liquid in all directions. Venturing forward a few steps, it becomes clear that the woman is *Shiki*. As for the object which I first took for some sort of fountain?

A corpse, its form too mangled and bloody to identify at first sight. Somehow, I'm neither shocked nor surprised. Perhaps it's because the same terrible premonition lingered in my thoughts just moments before, and in an instant, it turned into reality. Now my mind is blank.

The body is fresh, otherwise it wouldn't bleed profusely like that. The fatal wound starts at the neck, and continues down at an angle towards the body in a single, clean cut, like some macabre stole.

Shiki stares at the body, standing still like a statue.

The rich, red color of the spraying blood is enough to make me faint, but the organs seeping forth from the gaping wound makes the body look less like a human and more like a twisted facsimile of one made by someone mad. It repels and disgusts me so much that it's hard to look at.

Yet *Shiki* only continues to stare, unperturbed and placid.

Red butterflies take flight from the wound, and descend lightly on *Shiki's* face, and on her ghostly kimono. Her blood-soaked lips twist into a shape... is it of fear, or of pleasure? Is she *Shiki* or **Shiki**? I try to say something, but my voice stops, and I fall to the ground just because of the effort of trying to talk.

I vomit, my stomach retching out all its contents, all the bile. I wish it retched out this memory as well, but no such luck. I vomit so hard I start to cry. But that doesn't make me feel any more relieved. The overwhelming smell of the blood is so rich it drowns my brain. And finally, *Shiki* notices me. She turns her head to look at me, and I see now that the twist on her lips earlier was a smile, a kind of warm, motherly smile that is so at odds with the scene that it makes me shiver.

I can feel my consciousness start to leave me as she walks closer to me. Before I faint, she utters something at me.

"Do be careful, Kokutō. A terrible premonition echoes a terrible reality."

I guess I was too optimistic. I refused to even think about this outcome until I was face to face with it.

The First Homicide Inquiry - V

I heard they found me lying on the ground near a puddle of my own vomit, awake but lying there dumbfounded. A patrolman spotted me and took me to a nearby station, where I was taken into questioning. Unfortunately, I was in a state of shock for about four hours, and they couldn't get anything out of me. I guess my brain isn't really prepared for that sort of thing. I don't know if anybody is. The time it took from the interview to them releasing me made it so that I couldn't make it to school anymore, so I decided to take a break today.

While the corpse was spreading blood profusely all over the place, I was lucky enough to be far away and so didn't have any blood spatter on me, so that (and the fact that I'm Daisuke's cousin) sped up the processing quite a bit. Right now, Daisuke is giving me a ride back home.

"So, you really didn't see anyone, Mikiya?"

"I said I didn't. What's it gonna take for you to believe me, huh?" I find myself surprised at the annoyed tone I take, but Daisuke just seems to take it in stride.

"Alright, alright, I believe you. Fuck. I guess I should just be happy you're alive; the killer wouldn't have let you live if you'd seen anything. But god-damit. This case is still a stone-fucking-whodunit."

"It's a career case if you solve it, though."

How sick am I, joking around with Daisuke like this? A voice in my head keeps whispering, *liar, liar*, and yet here I am lying with a straight face to a police detective who'd probably waste no second throwing me behind bars if he found out I was withholding information. Yet still, I didn't say anything about *Shiki* being in the scene of the crime.

"So, Mikiya, how was your first body?"

"Well, spilled my guts out, didn't I? I never want to see another one again if I can help it."

Daisuke gives a small chuckle and says "Yeah, I had that feeling too, first time around. Not every body that gets dumped in this city is like that, though, so you can rest easy."

Oh. Well, sure, Daisuke, I'll rest easy on the fact that at least not all dead bodies you get are horribly mutilated.

"But I didn't know you were a friend of the Ryōgi girl, Mikiya. Small world."

The knowledge of me befriending *Shiki* makes him smile for some unknown reason, which makes me just a little bit more nervous. On record,

they chalked this recent incident up to the same killer as all the others, and they took my statement that I was there on the night of February 3rd only after the murder had happened and the suspect had taken off. Both the Ryōgi family and myself have said nothing about *Shiki*, even though they must know that I know by now.

"So did you investigate the family or something?" I ask Daisuke.

"Hey, I wanted to, seeing as the daughter, *Shiki*, goes to your school, but they didn't want to for some reason, and I can't go knocking down their door when I don't have a charge against them. Not that that makes them automatically suspicious or anything, but the only thing they said to me was 'what happens outside of our grounds is none of our business.' Bunch of stuck up fools if you ask me."

Strange. This combined with the fact that they stopped the investigation just outside the grounds of the Ryōgi family and didn't even try to ask going in makes me think the Ryōgis have some sort of suction on the force.

"You ask me, though, I don't really think they had anything to do with it," Daisuke says suddenly.

"Huh? Why?"

Even though I make light of him most of the time, the truth is, I have faith in Daisuke's detective skills. He's cracked some tough nuts in the past, and it's undoubtedly made him a valuable asset to the homicide division, despite his lack of reluctance in sharing police information with his all too curious cousin. I thought for sure he'd be at least a little suspicious about *Shiki*.

"I just can't see why any one of them would want to suddenly kill people. There's no motive, at least not one I can see." Then his eyes lose their look of contemplation, and he smiles at me. "Besides, you don't see a girl like their daughter killing anybody, right? Too much of a looker for that to happen."

I sigh, and think fruitlessly at why such a carefree man is in such a grim occupation. "And that's why you'll be single for the rest of your life," I reply.

"Say any more and I'll exercise my ability to lock you up for 24 hours without probable cause."

We don't talk for the rest of the ride, but I do agree with Daisuke, even without his "amazing" powers of intuition. I mean, strictly speaking, I didn't really see *Shiki* do anything, and I'm sticking to that one fact, even if she herself tells me otherwise.

Now I have something I need to do.

In retrospect, that was the last time for a long time that a murder like that happened. The elusive form and shape of the serial killer would not begin to become much clearer until three years later, and yet it all seems like a world apart to me now. But that was the first and last time that *Shiki* would ever face me with a look as frightening as she had that night.

I 5

Just outside the grounds of our manor, in the stone path that led to the house, a murder took place.

My stroll on that night was a scattered recollection of waking moments and seemingly blank unconsciousness, a trend that has started only recently, but connecting the moments I do remember seems to lead me to the obvious conclusion as to what I did.

The disfigured corpse sprayed blood in every direction, and the very sight of the crimson liquid made my head spin and my knees weak. **Shiki** felt the same way, but I imagine for entirely different reasons. Worse, this person's blood was especially *beautiful*. The way the blood seeped and flowed through the little spaces in between the stones of the path seemed to me to be the most elegant thing I'd ever seen in my life.

Before long, I noticed that there was someone some distance behind me, retching at the spectacle before him, and when I turned my head to face him, it turned out to be Mikiya. I didn't know the reason why he would be there at that late hour, and I didn't even think about it at the time. After that, there was another spate of unconsciousness, but I think I remember returning to the mansion. I found out that the body was discovered much later, and strangely enough, there was no talk of me being there. Was the Mikiya I saw just a hallucination, some phantom dream designed by my mind? That man is too honest; there's no way he would lie to the police to cover up the real killer.

And why did it have to be done in front of my house?

“Was it you, **Shiki**?” I ask out loud, but no answer came from within or without. The rift of disconnection between me and **Shiki** grew stronger with each passing day. Even if I hand him control of myself, we both have to want something to do it. But why is it that recently, when **Shiki** is in control, my memory becomes misty and indistinct?

Maybe, just maybe, without me noticing, I've become just as insane as the other members of the Ryōgi dynasty.

Jesus Christ, will you stop worrying? Here's the thing: if you even so much as think you're insane, it means you're not.

His voice comes to fore and berates me, but he's right. Well, at least I'd like to think he's right. Someone insane doesn't question his own sanity. That at least gives me some comfort.

A knock comes from the door of my room, and the voice of Akitaka comes right after, interrupting my thoughts. “My lady, may I intrude for a

moment?" I invite him inside my room, but he refuses due to the late hour.

"Is there something the matter?" I ask.

"There seems to be someone keeping watch over the house."

"But I heard that Father managed to drive all the policemen away."

Akitaka nods. "The police withdrew from further investigation of the premises since last night. This one is an entirely different matter, however."

"You may do as you please. I don't care who it is, he or she has nothing to do with me."

"But my lady, the one who is keeping watch seems to be your friend from school."

Upon hearing that, I stand up from the bed and immediately make my way to the window in my room, with its clear overlooking view of the mansion gate. I pull back the curtain and look outside, keeping my eyes trained beyond the walls. Sure enough, there he was, a solitary figure silhouetted in between the trees. I don't know whether to laugh or be disappointed at his laughable attempt at concealing himself.

"Only say the word and I will ask him to leave," says Akitaka.

"No, not tonight, I think. Leave him and do him no harm. He isn't causing any trouble."

I skip lightly across the floor back to my bed and lie down. Akitaka says a final formal "goodnight", turns off the lights, and closes the door.

The next few minutes consist of me attempting and failing to fall asleep, as my mind keeps drifting back to the window and outside. With nothing to do, I give up and approach the window again, making sure he's still there. And sure enough, he is.

Despite his brown duffle coat, Mikiya is visibly shivering from the cold air. White puffs of air emanate from his mouth with every breath as he keeps watch on the gate with only a thermos of coffee by his feet to keep him company.

Now there's really no way that the Mikiya I saw in my fragmented memory was a dream. I can guess what he's here for: to see if I'm really the killer. This could even be just a foolish attempt by him to keep the killer from ever doing it again; some sense of responsibility on his part as a witness. Watching him from this window while thinking, I bite a fingernail, as I am wont to do when angry. I guess there's nothing else to do but force myself to sleep.

I 6

I had already expected a less than customary greeting from Mikiya at school today, if any at all, so him saying...

“Shiki, wanna eat lunch together?”

...like nothing had happened is more than a little suspect. And as always, I go along with him. I feel like a pet being bribed to go the roof with food. I had already decided beforehand that I would try not to associate myself with him anymore, but I would be lying if I said that I didn’t want to know what he himself thought about that night. I took his offer for lunch thinking he would be the one asking me the obvious question, but he’s just thoroughly ignoring the elephant in the room with this one.

“Does your house really need to be that big? Last time I went there, you even had a butler of some sort.”

“Akitaka is more like my father’s private secretary. And I like to call him a caretaker rather than a servant, Kokutō.”

“So I guess there really are people like that, huh?” he says, bookending his sentence with a nervous laugh. His voice exhibits a noticeable quiver.

I can’t judge by his attitude whether or not he knows that we’ve realized he’s spying on the house, but still, even given the circumstances he’s acting too strange. There’s no way he couldn’t have seen me covered in blood given how close he was standing to the entire thing, but why is he still laughing and talking to me as if it was some big joke? Well, if he’s not talking about it, then it’s going to have to come from me.

“Kokutō, on the night of February 3rd, you were—“

“Can we not talk about it?” And just like that, he sweeps the question away.

“What exactly is it that **we can’t talk about, Kokutō?**”

Unbelievable. The slight shift in tone, the vocal mannerism, the slightly off-beat way I just pronounced his surname. For a second there, **Shiki** owned my voice. Even Mikiya noticed; it’s all right there on his face. Strange. That’s never happened before, and it stuns me momentarily. I take a half-second of time to compose myself, clear my throat, and continue. “Be frank with me. Why did you not tell anything to the authorities?”

“Because,” Mikiya answers, “I didn’t see anything.”

You liar. That can’t be true.

— that can’t be true because that night, **Shiki** approached you —

“You just happened to be there,” he continues. “That’s the only thing I saw at the very least. So I decided to believe you.”

You liar. If you believed me, why did you keep watch outside my house?

— **Shiki** drew closer, rain-speckled and blood-spattered —

“Honestly, it’s hard for me to talk about right now. Once I have more confidence in myself and put it behind me, maybe I can hear what you have to say. But for now, just...please, let’s not talk about it.”

How I so wanted to look away from him, to run away from the honesty in his face. To me, it looked like it was accusing me of murder.

— **Shiki** stood over him, and there was no mistaking it. He wanted to kill Mikiya.

Even though I never wanted to kill him. He said he believed in me. If I could only throw away that impulse, if only I believed in myself, then maybe I could have been spared the taste of this strange new sadness.

I did my damndest to avoid Mikiya after that day. After two days, he gave up on talking to me too, but he still sits outside the walls of the mansion every night without fail, for close to two weeks now. I admire his persistence, if nothing else. Under the chill of winter, Mikiya sits just a little inside the bamboo tree line outside of the grounds, watching the gate, and he does this until three o’ clock in the morning. Every night I spy a look at him, and every night I bite a nail in annoyance. I guess he got his wish; because of him, I haven’t been going out of the house at night lately.

At three o’ clock in the morning, he always leaves not with a tired or worn out face, but with a smile. He isn’t doing this to find out who the killer is. He said he trusted me, as if it was entirely natural to do so. He’s doing this to prove, or otherwise convince himself, that I am innocent. That’s why, when the dawn breaks, and he starts to leave, he smiles. Because nothing happened.

“I guess optimism is in his blood,” I murmured quietly, one night while watching him. And it makes me think. Being with Mikiya makes me calmer, more at peace. Being with Mikiya fools me into thinking I’m one of his kind. Being with Mikiya makes me think I can actually go to his side of the world, a bright side of the world that I’ll never be allowed into, a world that has no place for me. And with that dumb smile on his face, he tries to drag me in.

That’s the real reason why I’m irritated at him. I’ve nursed a murderer inside me named **Shiki** for as long as I’ve lived, but Mikiya keeps showing me a better life, without **Shiki**, without the impulse of killing. But instead of making me happy, it just strengthens what I already know: that I am not normal, I don’t belong.

"I've survived being alone my entire life, but now you're proving to be a nuisance, Kokutō," I murmur out loud.

I don't want to go insane.

I don't want to break.

If he hadn't given me the dream, that small spark of hope of a normal life, everything would have turned out better for me.

I 7

March has just begun, and already the cold seems to be receding. After class, I stay in the classroom and look outside the window. It feels like forever since I last did so. Here, in this window, the world that I view from on high actually makes me feel secure. A view of a world that I can't reach doesn't make me entertain any illusions of reaching it.

And like a vision from older, better times, Mikiya enters the sunset bathed classroom in exactly the manner he used to do. **Shiki** always liked to talk to him like this. I did as well.

"I never thought I'd get invited by you again to talk after class," Mikiya says. "Are you going to stop ignoring me now?"

"It's because I realized I can't go on doing that that I called you."

His eyes twitch a moment in surprise. Even though **Shiki** is trying his best to overcome me and take over, I try to hold out long enough to say what I have to say to Mikiya.

"You said before that I'm not a murderer." I can barely see Mikiya's face against the bright red glow of the sunset, but I can see he's disappointed that we had to talk about this. "Too bad. I am a murderer. You were at the scene of the crime, but why didn't you tell anything to the police?"

"Because there's nothing for me to tell. You didn't do anything, right?"

"Even if I'm saying it to your face right now?"

He nods. "Hey, you're the one that said that I should take everything you say with a grain of salt. There's no way you were the one that did that. I'm sure of it."

"What are you so sure of? What do you even know about me? What part of me can you believe in?" Unintentionally, my anger at him grows. For his part, he gives me a half-baked smile.

"I don't have any basis, but I trust you. See, I like you, so I want to keep on believing in you."

And that makes me stop like I'd just run into a wall. Those words which are probably just nothing to him are the most that anyone has given me; happiness, and my destruction, in one sentence. This carefree man has given me the illusion of a time spent with someone, a better world that's not for me. Because I know that if I ever get close to someone, **Shiki** will come out and kill him, because denial is the sole reason he exists. And because he cannot live without affirmation, I exist. But because I've never been close to anything in my entire life, I could live through the paradox. Now that I know the world he can give me, the more I wish for it, the more

I realize that it's a hopeless and impossible wish. It hurts me and I hate it, and for the first time ever, I hate Mikiya from the bottom of my heart for making me realize it.

And he laughs like it means nothing.

I can't stand being here anymore. I can't stand him. I see it now. This is how Mikiya will destroy me.

"You are a fool," I declare.

"Yeah, I get that a lot."

As the sunset slowly turns to dusk, I exit the classroom while I still can. Before I cross the doorway however, I do one last thing. With my back still turned, I ask Mikiya a question.

"Are you coming tonight?"

"What?" He sounds surprised. I guess he still doesn't realize I watch his little vigils. He tries to wave it off, but I insist.

"Answer me, damn you."

"I don't know what you're talking about, but if I feel like going to your house, I will."

And with that I leave him in the classroom, and exit the school grounds. Gray clouds dot the red horizon, and the low rumble of thunder sounds off in the distance. I guess it'll be a rainy night tonight.

The First Homicide Inquiry - VI

Only when the sun had finally retreated and it became dark, just as I was making my way to *Shiki's* house, did the rain finally start to pour. Nice of it to wait like that. It isn't a torrential downfall, but it isn't a light drizzle either. The small, pattering sounds of the raindrops on the stone path, and on the leaves, and on my umbrella made this a night full of noise. The rain water itself is still cold, a leftover of the winter that the coming of March had not yet completely erased. Together with the bamboo leaves and trees as my sole companions tonight, I keep my eyes trained on the mansion and the gate. My umbrella hand is turning red, growing numb from the cold.

I sigh, a big long one. I can't keep this thing up forever, obviously. First thing, it feels like I'm a stalker. Second thing, it's doing a number on my ability to keep awake in class. I'm gonna give it another week, and then I'll probably call it quits. It'd be nice if the killer was caught in that time, though.

I should have thought it would be the rain that would make me give in. It kinda feels like the cold and the rain are double teaming me just to lay off the creepy stake outs.

I sigh, another long one. It's not the rain that has me depressed though, but today's verbal sparring with *Shiki*. "What part of me can you believe in?" she said. If she thinks I don't believe her, than what have I actually been trying to do all this time? Anyone could tell from her face this afternoon that she was agonizing over something. She even looked like she was ready to cry; that, or tell you off. You never can tell with her.

The rain doesn't look like it'll end soon. The raindrops make ripples even on the little puddles of water. If you can learn to selectively ignore the noise the raindrops are making, I'm sure it might even be a peaceful, serene night. But to me it's just noise. And yet, even in all that noise, a singular splash, a single footfall behind me reverberates across the bamboo brush. I turn around to see only a solitary figure in a red kimono. It was her.

She'd been out in the rain for a long time, that much was obvious. She was drenched from top to bottom, her short, black hair sticking to her cheeks and face, casting a dark shadow over her eyes.

"*Shiki*." I make my way to her. She must have been out here since the rain started. Her red kimono is so damp it's sticking to her body, and her skin is so cold to the touch. I hold out my umbrella to cover the both of us while I rifle through my bag, searching for a towel.

"Here, wipe yourself with this." I extend my arm, towel draped over my

hand. "What the hell are you doing out here in the rain when your house is right there?"

She takes one glance at my outstretched arm, and laughs a bitter, queer laugh. It is punctuated by a keening sound slicing through the empty night air.

"Wh..." It happened faster than my eye could see. I feel something warm in my arm, and instinctively take a step back. The red warmth in my arm is flowing downwards like a snake, splitting in two and dripping.

My arm?

A cut?

Why?

The pain pierces me, courses through my arm, hurting like nothing I've ever felt before. It makes me numb. No time to think. No time to even panic.

She takes a step forward, I take a step back. Calmly. Have to run. Have to get away.

No.

No time to get away. I move fast, but she is faster, like a monster. Another keening sound, this time in my leg.

Red. Red mixes with the puddles in the path. My red blood, rippling outwards from the impact of raindrops. I see it, see the cut on my leg, feel the pain. I collapse, face-up, seeing the sky, the falling rain. My back hits the stone path. I gasp at the sudden impact.

She climbs on top of me, and points her knife at my throat. Calm. No time for panic. The noise of the rainfall retreats, ignored. Just calm.

I look up, and see the darkness of the sky, and her, set against that darkness. Her eyes are black and implacable, like an abyss, and I see myself reflected in that void.

I can feel the tip of the knife, just below my chin, steel cold to the touch like her skin. Like the blood on my leg, little water drops snake down her face, a face framed by her black hair; like a mask, it is blank, terrifying, and pitiful all at the same time.

"*Kokutō, say something. Anything,*" *Shiki* says. My last words. She wants to hear them. I look her straight in the eye, and speak with a wavering voice, desperately trying to keep calm.

"I...don't want...to die."

Somehow, I felt I wasn't saying this to *Shiki*, but to the death that was now coming for me.

She smiles.

“I...I want to kill you.”

It was a very gentle smile.

Epilogue

It's July 1998, and I celebrate a little in my head as I finish up the day's work early, just before lunch break. I say "work" but really, I'm just more of a secretary to Miss Tōko than anything, mostly doing the odd job she needs doing. I'm lucky to even get work at all, having dropped out of college halfway.

"Kokutō, isn't today your weekly visit?"

"Yes, ma'am. Soon as I finish this up, I'm going there right away."

"Oh, don't delay on account of me. You can go early. There's nothing more for you to do here today, anyway."

I have to say, Miss Tōko's temperament when her glasses are on is much more preferable. And after all, this is a good day for her too; since it's the day she cleans that car she's so proud of to an immaculate sparkle. She always likes doing that.

"Thanks, ma'am. I'll be back in about two hours."

"Bring me back a snack or two, all right?" She waves me a goodbye just before I close the door to her office.

Shiki Ryōgi is still in the hospital, still in a coma unable to do anything. I still go to visit her every Saturday afternoon. She never told me about any pain she was holding in, or anything she thought about. I don't even know why she tried to kill me. But at least she smiled in the end, even if it was a faint one. At least she smiled, and that was enough.

Gakutō had it right a long time ago. I was already crazy. I guess that's why I am the way I am today even after a brush with death.

I still remember the last time we stood in the sunset lit classroom. Under that burning, blood red sky, *Shiki* asked me what part of her I believed in. And I still remember my answer.

"I don't have any basis, but I trust you. I like you, so I want to keep believing in you."

A premature answer, perhaps. I said I didn't have any basis, but the truth is, I did. I just didn't know it at the time. She didn't kill anyone. That, at least, I could believe in. Because *Shiki* knew how painful murder was. She, above all others, knew the suffering that the victim and the murderer went through.

That's why I believed: in *Shiki*, who couldn't express herself, in **Shiki**, who wasn't given a chance to be a person, in *Shiki*, who was far from pain, and in **Shiki**, who knew nothing but pain.

THE THREE PIECES NOW LIE PRISED ON THE BOARD.
ONE A MIND ENTWINED WITH A SPECTER FLOATING, AND
ON DEATH, DEPENDENT.

ONE A LIFE IN PARADOX ETERNAL, AND IN DEATH, PLEASURE.

ONE A PREDATOR WITH ORIGIN AWAKENED, AND TO DEATH,
GNOSIS.

THREE NOW SWIRL AND DANCE, AND IN THE SPIRAL OF
CONFLICT THEY WAIT.



3 痛覚残留

Part I: Lingering Rain
ever cry, never life.

When I was little, I played house a lot. I had a pretend family, with a pretend pet, a pretend kitchen, and I would cook pretend food.

But one day, a real blade had accidentally been mixed up in the artificial, pretend ones.

I had never seen a toy that sharp before, and I used it to play, and in the process cut myself deeply between the fingers.

I approached my mother with red soaked palms outstretched, and I remember her scolding me for it, then crying and embracing me, saying “I know it hurts, but we’ll fix it,” over and over again.

It was not her consolation that made me happy, but her embracing me, and so I started to cry as well.

“Don’t worry, Fujino. The pain will go away once the wound heals,” she said while wrapping a bandage around my hand.

At the time, I didn’t understand what she was trying to say.

Because not even for a moment did I feel any pain.

Lingering Rain

"Well, she certainly has her way of introducing herself," the professor remarks.

The university science lab has that synthetic smell of chemical disinfectants that reminds me more of hospitals. But the laboratory equipment dispels any notion of that quickly. As does the white-coated professor who Miss Tōko sent me to meet today, who now displays a reptilian smile of full white teeth while offering a handshake. I take it.

"So you have an interest in parapsychology, eh?" he asks.

"Not really. I just want to know some minor things about the topic."

"And that's what you call 'interest.'" He wrinkles his nose, satisfied at his show of wit. "Well, it doesn't matter anyway. I'd expect nothing less from her associate. I mean, she asks you to hand her business card as an introduction. She was always a unique one, and talented. I wish our university had more students of her caliber."

"Er...yes, I'm sure your student problems are important." I'm starting to see where Miss Tōko gets her ability to ramble so much from. "But I was asking about—"

"Ah, yes, yes, parapsychology. There are many different phenomena that fall under that label. Our university doesn't really deal with it, however. I'm sure you can understand when I say it's treated as quack science by most in my field. There are very few universities here in Japan still giving grants for parapsychology studies. Even so, I've heard a few have had some marginal successes, though the actual details don't really—"

"Yes, professor, I'd imagine those studies are fascinating, but I'm more interested in how people end up having them in the first place."

"Well, to simplify, you can liken it to a card game. You play card games, don't you? What card game is the most popular right now?"

I scratch my head, deciding to go along with this man's logic. "Erm... poker, I guess?"

"Ah yes, poker. I've had my own fond memories with that game." He clears his throat for a moment, then moves on. "Let us say that human brains are all playing a game. Your brain and mine are playing poker. Most everyone else in society is playing poker as well. There are other games, but we can't play them. Everyone is in consensus that poker is the game we have to play, because that's how we define being normal. Are you following me so far?"

"So you're saying that everyone plays a boring card game?"

"But see, that's what makes it better for everyone. Since everyone plays poker, we're protected by arbitrary, but absolute rules of our own creation, and thus we can live in a peaceful consensus."

"But if I'm getting you right, you're saying the other games aside from poker aren't so clear cut?"

"We can only speculate. Say some other minds are playing a game with rules that have an allowance for plants to communicate, and maybe other minds prefer a game that has rules that say you can move a body other than your own. These are not the same games as poker. They have their own consensus, their own rules. When you play poker, you play by its rules, but those playing by the rules of other games don't conform. To them, poker doesn't make a lick of sense."

"So you're saying that people not 'playing poker', so to speak, have some mental abnormalities?"

"Exactly. Consider a person that knew no other game than the game where you could communicate with plants. In the rules of his game, he talks to plants, but he can't talk to people. People who see him then brand him as crazy and put him in the funhouse. If he really could talk to plants, then that's a person with paranormal abilities right there: a person that plays a different game, follows different rules, than the game society plays. However, I'd imagine most people with these sorts of abilities are still capable of switching their mindsets, so that they can still live mostly unnoticed in society."

"Which makes the person that only plays the game where you can talk to plants a crazy person, since he lacks the shared subconscious experience and consensus inherent in playing poker, am I right? If he only knows the other game, and can't switch between the two, then he's considered mentally damaged."

"That's right. Society calls these people serial killers and psychopaths, but I would phrase them more appropriately as 'living paradoxes': People who, because they play by irregular rules of reality, make their existence itself a contradiction to reality. People who shouldn't be able to exist, who can't exist." He pauses for a half beat to collect himself, then added. "This is all hypothetical, of course." As if he needed to say it.

"Of course, professor. Is there any way to correct a living paradox like you said?"

"You'd have to destroy the very rules they play by within their minds. But destroying the brain just equates to killing them, so there's really no easy way, or really no other way but to kill them. No one can just suddenly alter a state of mind or ability like that. If there was, then that person him-

self would also be playing a different game with different rules. Something like solitaire. I hear that game has some pretty complex rules in it."

The professor laughs heartily, apparently immensely amused at his own joke. I can't say I share the sentiment.

"Thanks, professor. You've helped loads. I suppose now I know what I'll do when I encounter psychokinetic people." I say it only half sarcastically.

"Psychokinesis? Like bending spoons, things like that?"

Oh, brother, here we go again. "Or heck, why not a human arm?" That one was less of a joke.

"If we're going by spoon bending, then you have nothing to fear. The force required to bend a spoon would take days to distort a human arm. If there was someone who could bend an arm, I suggest a hasty withdrawal."

Now that he mentions it, now's probably the right time for a hasty withdrawal myself. "I'm sorry to cut this short, professor, but I really need to go. I have to get to Nagano, and I'd like to do it *today*. Sorry for eating up too much of your time."

"Oh, no, it's quite alright. Any friend of hers is a friend of mine. Come by any time you need to. And send my regards to Aozaki, won't you?"

/1

Fujino Asagami, still in a state of confusion and disorientation, pulls herself up in the middle of a darkened room. The silhouettes of people standing and milling about, once so familiar, are now gone. The light isn't turned on. No, not quite right. There was no light in the first place, and darkness stretches all over the room, with nary a peek or a beam of light seeping in.

She exhales a long sigh, and brushes her long, black hair lightly with trembling fingers. The loose tassel of hair she once hung lazily on her left shoulder is now gone, probably cut off by the man with the knife while he was on top of her. After remembering that, she slowly surveys the room around her.

This is— was —an underground bar. Half a year ago, this bar ran into financial difficulties, and it was abandoned. Not long after, it became just another abandoned establishment blending in the dying city, a haunt for various delinquents and robbers. Much of the effects from its better days still lay forgotten inside. In the corner rests a banged up pipe chair. In the middle of the room, next to Fujino, is a single pool table. Everywhere in the room, convenience store food is scattered in rotting, half-finished piles with cockroaches scrabbling all over the remains, and a mountain of garbage is stacked haphazardly to one side. In a corner, a bucket is almost filled with urine, a communal container to compensate for the lack of a working toilet. The combined stench of it all is potent, and almost makes Fujino vomit.

With no light and no way to know where you are, this dark, secluded ruin could have been in a skid row of some far off country for all anyone knows. One wouldn't even think there was a normal city on the other side of the door on the top of the stairwell. The faint smell of the alcohol lamp those men brought here is the only thing that maintains any sense of normalcy.

"Umm..." Fujino mumbles. She looks around slowly, as if this scene is completely routine. Her body had gotten up from the pool table, but her mind still has some catching up to do.

She picks up a nearby wrist, flesh showing tears and seemingly twisted off from the arm. Wrapped lovingly and securely around it is a digital wrist-watch, and in glowing green text, it shows the date: July 20, 1998. The time: 8:00pm, not even an hour after what happened.

All at once, Fujino is assailed by sudden, blinding pain in her abdomen, and she lets slip a strained grunt. She staggers from the ache, and barely

stops herself from falling face first to the floor by supporting herself with her hands. As soon as her palms touch the floor, she hears a soft splash. Remembering that it had been raining today, she realizes that the whole room is flooded with water...and something else.

She takes a moment's glance at her abdomen, and sees the distinct spatter of dried blood—right in the place where those men stabbed her.

The man who stabbed Fujino was a familiar face to anyone in this part of town. He seemed to be the ringleader of a crew that consisted of high school dropouts and various drifters of similar minds and motivations. They did what they felt: stick-ups, assault, robbery, arson, drugs, you name it. They plied their trade in the forgotten maze of backlanes between the buildings of the commercial district, where no neon glow or curious glance could ever reach. They emerged from these alleys to the harsh lights of the peopled avenues for only short intervals, to catch their victims through coercion or force and had their twisted entertainment for the night. It is on one such normal night that this crew and Fujino crossed paths.

It was a perfect setup. A student of Reien Girl's Academy, and quite good looking, Fujino became a prime target for the men. Perhaps fearing public vilification, Fujino never told anyone of how she was victimized. This fact eventually reached the ears of the men, however, after which whatever hesitation they might have had about being found out disappeared. They raped her again and again, bringing her to this underground bar after school. Tonight was supposed to be another routine night, like always, but their leader apparently got tired of just doing Fujino.

He brought out a knife, probably to bring something a little new to the table. He'd felt offended by what Fujino did: how she just lived her days as if they hadn't done anything to her at all, as if what they did to her didn't humiliate her. He felt he needed more proof of Fujino's humiliation and his dominance. And he needed just that little bit of violence, that little ounce of extra pain for that, hence the knife.

But Fujino didn't even react, her face a blank expression, even when he had a knife ready to dig deep in her face. This made him truly incensed. He pushed her down to the table, and got to work.

Casting her eyes downward, Fujino looks at her blood-soaked clothes and thinks: *I can't go out looking like this.*

Her own spilt blood is concentrated only on her abdomen, but she's soaked in their blood from head to toe. *How stupid of me to get dirtied like this.* Her foot hits one of their scattered limbs on the floor, and it gives a little shake in response. She considers her options.

If she waits one more hour, the number of pedestrians will start to dwindle. And the fact that it's raining only helps. It's summer, so it's not too cold. She'll just let the rain wash some of the blood of her, and go to a park and clean herself up there.

After coming to this conclusion, she calms down. Walking away from the dark pool of water and blood, she takes a seat at the pool table, taking a count of the scattered limbs to find out how many corpses are lying on the floor.

One.

Two.

Three.

Four.

Four. Four. Four? No matter how many times I count, it only comes down to four! A mix of astonishment and terror. One is missing.

"So, one of them managed to escape," Fujino murmurs to herself. She lets slip a small sigh.

If so, I'll be caught by the police. If he'd already run to a station, I'll be arrested for sure. But could he really tell the police? How would he be able to explain what just happened? Would he tell them how they kidnapped and violated me, and told me to shut up? He'd need a cover story. And none of them were ever smart enough for that.

She lights the alcohol lamp on the billiard table to get a better view. Its flickering orange glow illuminates the entire room, making the shadows twirl and dance. The story of violence in the room is quite visible now: sixteen arms, sixteen legs, four torsos, four heads, and wet blood spatters in every direction. Fujino is unfazed by the brutality of the scene before her. No time to think on that. After all, the count was missing one, which meant she still had something to do.

Do I have to take revenge?

Her body trembles as if to reinforce her lack of conviction. *No more killing,* she tries to tell herself, as earnestly as she possibly can. But she remembers what they did to her, and what they could do to her if she doesn't permanently shut the mouth of the one who escaped. Her body trembles again, not in anger, but in something else. Delight? A relishing of what is to come? And, for the moment at least, what doubt lingers in her mind vanishes.

On Fujino's blood tinted reflection on the floor, a little smile plays across her face.

Lingering Pain - I

July is about to end, but not before it dumps a lot of business in my plate. Starting from my friend who, comatose for two years, has finally regained consciousness, to finishing my second big job since dropping out of college and working for Miss Tōko, and even having my sister who I haven't seen for five years coming here to Tokyo for a visit, I've had little time to even stop and take a breath. I don't know if starting my nineteenth summer like this is the good earth's way of saying "nice job" or "Mikiya Kokutō needs to be screwed over with greater frequency."

Tonight is one of those rarest of nights, my night off, so I went with some of my old high school friends to go drinking. And before I could so much as glance at an hour hand, I'd noticed it was late and the train had long since made its last run, leaving me with few commuting options to go back home. Some of my friends took taxis home, but since my payday was held off till tomorrow, my budget can't cooperate. Left without a choice, I decided to walk back home. Fortunately, my house was only two stations and a block or two away, not too far a distance.

It was the 20th of July up until a few minutes ago. In the midnight of the 21st, I find myself walking in the shopping district, which, seeing as tomorrow is a weekday, sees little foot traffic at this hour. It had rained particularly hard tonight. Luckily, it stopped just as me and my friends were going home for the evening, but the asphalt, still wet, is emitting its potent petrichor smell, and my footsteps make little splashes on the scattered puddles of the streets and sidewalks.

While the above 30 degree Celsius temperature and the humidity of the rain work to make this the most miserable stroll in recent memory, I come across a girl, crouching on the sidewalk and putting pressure on her stomach with her hand like she was in pain. That black school uniform she's wearing is one I'm familiar with. The uniform, made to resemble a nun's habit, is the school dress of that academy of ladies of refined taste and upright morals, the Reien Girl's Academy. Gakuto jokes that half the reason for Reien's popularity is precisely because of the uniform. Not that I'm one that goes in for that kind of thing; I only know it because my sister Azaka studies there. I know they're a boarding school, though, which makes that girl's presence here at this late hour doubly suspicious. Or maybe she's just some delinquent that doesn't like to follow school regulations.

Seeing as she's from my sister's school, I decide to lend a helping hand. When I call out a simple "hello" to her, she turns to face me, and her black

hair, wet from the rain, sways when she does. I see her gasp once, though quite silently, as if trying to suppress it. Her face is small, with sharp features. She wears her long hair straight down her back, and it separates around her right ear to form a tassel that goes down to her chest. It seems there is supposed to be a similar tassel on her left ear but it looks like it's been cut. That, along with her bangs, cut straight and clean in the school prescribed manner, makes me think she's the daughter of some rich, well-to-do family with an eye for proper grooming standards.

"Yes, what is it?" Her voice is faint and her face is equally pale. Her lips are tinted purple, the mark of someone with cyanosis. With a hand on her stomach, she's trying her best to look at me normally, but the little muscle movements and the folds in the face that mark a person in pain are obvious.

"Does your stomach hurt?"

"No, er...that is, I...I mean..." She's pretending to be calm, but she's already stumbling all over her words. She looks fragile, like she could suffer from a mental break down at any moment, not unlike Shiki when I first met her.

"You're a long way away from Reien Academy, lady. Miss the train? I could call a taxi for you."

"No, you don't need to. I don't have any money anyway."

"Yeah, join the club." Before I'd realized it, I'd already given her an impolite answer. Try to salvage this one, Mikiya. "Yeah...so I guess you must live near here huh? I heard it was a boarding school but you probably have some special dispensation to go out."

"Not really. My house is quite far."

Right. Scratch that.

"So what are you, a runaway?"

"Yes, I think that's the only thing I can do right now."

Oh, man, that means trouble. I just noticed that she's soaked right through. Maybe she couldn't find an umbrella or a shade the whole time it rained, because she is dripping wet all over. The last time I was face to face with a girl soaking wet in rain, I almost got killed, so I guess that's why I'm so awkward around this girl now. You never can trust girls in rain. Still, it'll be a waste of time if I don't help her now.

"So, you want to sleep over at my place just for tonight?"

"...can I?" she asks, still crouching and looking desperately at me. I nod.

"I have a place all to myself, but I'm not making you any guarantees. I'm not planning on doing anything questionable that might offend your person, and as long as you don't do any funny business, we can keep it that

way. If that's fine with you, then you can follow me. Now, since my employer, in her infinite wisdom, has decided to delay my paycheck, I can't give you much money, but I do have painkillers for whatever's bothering you."

She looks happy and smiles. I extend a hand to her to help her up, and she gently grasps it and stands. I notice, for a moment, that there are red stains on the sidewalk where she was sitting.

Taking her with me, I start to lead her back to my apartment and get us both out of this wretched night.

"There's a short walk ahead of us. Tell me if you're having a hard time. I can at least be burdened with one girl on my back."

"You needn't worry. My wound has already closed up so it doesn't really hurt anymore," she says. The hand that she has yet to remove from pressing on her stomach, however, says otherwise.

"Does your stomach hurt?" I ask again, as much for her own peace of mind as mine.

She shakes her head, saying "no." After that, we continue to walk, and she keeps her silence for some time. But after walking for a few more minutes, she nods.

"Yes, it...it really hurts. Is it...all right for me to cry?" When I nod an affirmative, her face turns into an expression of contentment. She closes her eyes, looking like she's dreaming.

She hasn't really told me her name, and I haven't told her mine, and I feel it's more appropriate that it stay that way. As soon as we reach the apartment, the girl asks me if she can use the shower, to which I say yes. She also wants to dry her clothes, so with the lame excuse of buying a pack of smokes, I vacate myself from the premises for an hour to give her some time. Man, and I don't even smoke the damn things.

After an hour, I come back to find her already exploiting the living room sofa by sleeping on it. With all indications pointing to tons of work tomorrow, I decide to make good what little time I have left for sleep. I set my alarm clock to 7:30am, and I'm off to bed. Before falling asleep, I take one last look on her uniform, and can't help noticing it has the littlest of tears, just around her midsection.

I wake up the next morning to find her sitting in the living room doing nothing. Apparently she was waiting for me to get up. Once she sees me awake, she gives a quick bow.

"Thank you for what you did last night. I don't have any way to repay you, but I can at least thank you." She stands up and makes for the door.

"Wait up, wait up." I call after her while rubbing my eyes awake. I can't have her leave just like that when she waited for me to get up. "I can at least get you a breakfast."

That stops her. Food must really get to her. As I thought, she's just as hungry as anyone else would be after her ordeal last night. Now then, I've got some pasta and olive oil at the ready, which makes spaghetti the obvious choice for breakfast. I quickly whip up two portions of it and carry it to my dinner table, and we eat it together. Since it seems like she's not in a talking mood, I turn on the TV to watch some morning news. It's the usual diet of homicide in the city, but this one gave me a strange feeling.

"Ah, strange whodunits with a tinge of the weird. Just the kind of news that Miss Tōko would love." If I had said that in the office, I'd probably already be smacked upside the head with a projectile shoe. But the news item is bizarre.

The reporter on the scene told the story. Seems four bodies were found in an underground bar that had been abandoned for a half a year. All four of them had had their limbs torn off, and the crime scene was filled with blood. The scene is pretty close by, maybe four stations or so away from where we were drinking last night.

I make a mental note of the fact that the news said that their limbs were "torn off" and not "cut off." Regardless, the news has nothing more on that angle, and goes on to describe the details on the victims' lives: all teenagers, and delinquents who frequently hung around the neighborhood. It seems they were slinging drugs too; corner boys. They have a citizen on the mike now, commenting on the victims.

"Those kids knew what they were getting into, and they got it. I think they deserved to die."

And with those words, I turn the TV off. I hate it when people say those things, and I hate it even more when the media goes out of its way to give people like that the time of day. I turn back to look at my guest only to find her with a hand on her stomach just like last night. She hasn't even touched her food. There really must be something wrong with her stomach. She looks down, such that I can't see her face.

"Nobody deserves to die," she says in between ragged breaths, causing her next words come out in whispers. "Why does it still throb? It's already healed over, but why—"

Suddenly, she stands up not altogether calmly, making the chair fall to

the floor with a noise, and runs to the door. I start to stand up to go after her, but with head still cast downwards, she raises a palm towards me, as if to say I shouldn't come near her.

"Wait, calm down. I think I can—", I start to say, but she cuts me off.

"No, please. Now I know...I can never go back." That face—a face of pain and resistance, a face of contradiction—somehow reminds me of Shiki. The girl calms down a bit, bows deeply before me, and then turns the doorknob.

"Goodbye," she says. "I hope we don't see each other again, for both our sakes."

Then she opens the door and runs out. The last thing I see is her eyes, because she looked like she was about to cry.

Lingering Rain - II

After my guest leaves as suddenly and unexpectedly as I found her, I try to push it out of my mind. She was just a normal girl I found in the street and, in a spark of altruism, decided to help. She had some kind of pain, though, that much I can be sure, but the how eludes me at the moment. Still, no need for me to think on it more than that. She's gone, and there's nothing I can do about it. More importantly, I'm going to be late for work if I don't hurry. As soon as I finish up my morning rituals, I'm out the door instantly.

The place I work in isn't exactly what you'd call a "company", not in any official capacity anyway. My employer is an eccentric sort of woman, the kind of woman who buys an abandoned building only halfway finished and makes it her office; a woman in her late twenties, a collector of old, obscure trinkets, purveyor of ambiguous counsel, and all around weirdo, Miss Tōko Aozaki.

Ostensibly, she's a maker of dolls and puppets, but she seems to dabble in all manner of engineering and architectural work as well. These are, of course, her hobbies. I may have complaints about how she runs the place, but she's managed to keep this little enterprise of hers running before I was there so she must be doing something right. Besides, I'm not about to challenge the wisdom of my one and only source of income, especially when I don't have a degree in a time when actual job pickings are slim. In fact, I should consider myself lucky to find any kind of work at all.

The building, which in the middle of my musings I have managed to reach, is a four story structure, with the office at the top. Nestled between the industrial district and the housing projects, it projects a feeling of emptiness and solitude, like it doesn't belong. The longer you stare at it, the longer you gain this feeling of imposition, and going inside would be the last thing on one's mind. The building lacks modern 21st century luxuries such as elevators, so I start to climb the staircase.

As I enter the room, one person alone sits atop Miss Tōko's desk, a girl that looks decidedly out of place among the stacks of discarded papers and blueprints scattered all across the room. The girl in a fish-patterned indigo blue kimono turns her head at my entrance, looking at me with listless eyes, and I address her.

"Wait a minute. Shiki? What are you doing in this miserable dump?"

"Um, Kokutō? The owner of the place is right behind me, pal," she says in a tone of warning, while pointing behind her with her thumb.

Shiki moves aside to reveal Miss Tōko seated across the desk, a lighted cigarette positioned in her mouth, and sharp eyes burrowing into me with pointed glares. She wears the same simple pattern of white blouse and black pants, a combination she has upheld so religiously since the day I met her that you would think she'd wear the same thing at a funeral. She always seems obliged to wear at least one orange-colored accessory though, and today it is a single orange earring.

"Yeah, I'd say goodbye to your paycheck if I were you," Shiki adds. I gulp.

"Hmph. The Lord Tōko Almighty forgives you for your transgression since you arrived here earlier than I expected. Seriously, Kokutō. I told you there wouldn't be anything for you to do for a while so it's okay to show yourself around noon, and yet here you are."

"Miss Tōko, you know I'm not that kind of person." I can feel my wallet practically coaching me the words in my head. It's gets a bit lonely in there with only the stored value train ticket and phone card keeping each other company. "So, why is Shiki in this miserable dump?"

"Called her in. Thought there was a little business matter she could help me with."

For her part, Shiki seemed uninterested and withdrawn. She probably went out last night again, since she's rubbing one of her eyes. It's barely been a month since she recovered from her coma. We still find it hard to talk to each other, but we're taking it slow for now. Since she doesn't seem to be interested in talking to me right now, I sit myself down on my desk. With no real work to finish, there's nothing to do but chat.

"Did you happen to see the news this morning, Miss Tōko?"

"You're talking about the news on Broad Bridge, right? I keep saying it, but Japan doesn't need a bridge that big, goddamit."

What Miss Tōko is talking about is none other than the big ten kilometer bridge construction project scheduled to finish next year. This part of town is about a twenty minute drive away from the city port, a short distance. The port is situated in a crescent shaped coastline that forms a bay, and the bridge is planned to cross the gap between the extreme upper and lower parts of that crescent coastline in one straight highway, supposedly to divert traffic from the coast. The city's development council made a joint venture with some big construction company to "answer the complaints of the community." And of course, considering the history of the local government, a public works project that big has to have some taxpayer's money mysteriously disappearing into people's pockets. It's a typical story: the government makes public development projects to answer some new "problem" the citizens have, which doesn't exist except in their heads, and

everyone gets money. Worse, it's going to have its own aquarium, a museum, and a gigantic parking lot for God knows what reason; you don't know if the place is a bridge or some weird amusement park. The locals had been calling it the Bay Bridge since it started, but going from what Miss Tōko said, I suppose it's been officially christened as the Broad Bridge. It goes without saying that Miss Tōko and I do not hold this project in high esteem.

"Well, yeah, you say that, but I thought you already had an exhibit space there?" I comment wryly.

"That was just a complementary 'thank you' from the company. If it were up to me, I'd sell it, but how do you think it would look for Asagami Construction if I, the designer, refused the offer? But it's a stupid location, and it won't make me a lick of cash."

Uh oh. She's talking about deficit again. This has to be going somewhere I don't like. I have to find out about this now or else she's never going to give me the money.

"Um, Miss Tōko? About the cash. Pardon me for being so blunt with it but, you had promised me my salary today and—"

"Oh, yeah," she stretches the word out in a long drawl. "That. Unfortunately, I'm going to have to postpone your pay for a month." She spits it out like an unwanted curse, as if I was the one at fault for asking in the first place.

"But you had a million or some yen wired to your account yesterday! How could it all be gone?"

"I spent it, how else?" Miss Tōko rebuts nonchalantly, sitting in her chair and swiveling it from side to side making squeaking noises and adopting the general annoying air of feigned ignorance one receives from self-important people. Shiki and I just affix her with frustrated stares.

"But what on Earth could you spend that much money on?" I cry in outrage.

"Oh, nothing, just a silly little thing. A Victorian era Ouija board to be precise. I don't know if it works or not, but the hundred year value it has makes it fetch a high price. And if it's a numina container, then so much the better. It'll be a nice addition to my collection."

I can't believe how she's taking all of this in stride. It would have been a lot more convenient if she was just some two-bit illusionist with some hand tricks, but her actual sideline is being a mage; like, the real deal. Which is why she can talk all about esoteric topics such as "numina" or whatnot while keeping a totally straight face. And yet she can't even use her magic to make up some convenient excuse for my lack of pay.

"Come on, Kokutō, even you couldn't have resisted the bargain price.

Don't be so mad. At least now our wallets finally have something in common."

Having been shown by her what miracles mages are capable of doing, I was willing to be tolerant in how she handled things, but this was way too much. "So that's it, then? No pay for me this month?"

"Yep. All employees are to find other means of obtaining funding."

I stand up, and make my way towards the door. "Then, you'll excuse me for leaving early, since I'm gonna have to beg, borrow, or steal money to get by this month?"

"Early in, early out, huh? Just don't get caught stealing or I'll feel guilty." Then, she switches to a serious tone, as if to indicate the gravity of what she was about to say. "By the way, Kokutō. I've got a favor to ask you." Thinking it's the business between her and Shiki, I try to listen as hard as I can.

"What, Miss Tōko?"

Then smiling, she says "Can you spare me some money? I'm pretty broke."

I pinch my thumb and forefinger together in front of me and say, "This close to resignation."

I close the door with resentment; cutting off Miss Tōko's playful chuckling soon after.

/1

After witnessing the amusing exchange between Tōko and Mikiya, Shiki at last speaks her mind.

“Tōko, you were saying before we were interrupted?”

“Ah, right. I didn’t really want to take a job like this, but money comes first. If only I were an alchemist, then I wouldn’t have to worry so much about living expenses. Damn Kokutō for not sharing some of that money I know he saves over,” Tōko says with indignation. She extinguishes her cigarette on the ashtray. Mikiya is probably thinking something similar himself, Shiki thinks.

“Well, about that incident last night—” Tōko starts saying.

“I don’t need to hear any more on that. I get it, for the most part.”

“That so? Crime scene description only, and you can already read this girl? Sharp one, aren’t we?” Tōko looks at Shiki with eyes laden with meaning. Tōko has only described the details of the crime scene to Shiki, and yet Shiki understands that the girl’s story is writ large all over that vivid scene: proof, if anything, of her natural intuition when it comes to these matters. Tōko knew she’d understand; they come from the same dirty side of the world, after all.

“Our benefactor for this job has an idea who the target is. If you encounter her, orders are to try and see if she goes along quietly. But if she shows any willingness to fight back, any at all, then oblige her. ‘Least you’ll see if those blade skills of yours have rusted some.’”

“I see.” Shiki’s only answer. To her, the job was simple. Hunt her down, and kill her. “What do we do about the body?”

“If you kill her, then the client has the means to make this look like an accident. Don’t worry about the fallout on this one. She’s dead to the world, as far as our client is concerned. Got no moral qualms about killing dead people, right?” Tōko gives a little laugh. “So, you in on this? You ask me, it’s tailor made for you.”

“I don’t even need to answer that.” Shiki starts to walk towards the exit.

“You’re eager to start. Are you spoiling for blood that much, Shiki?”

She doesn’t answer.

“Hey, you forgot this.” Tōko tosses a folder at Shiki. “Some photos and the particulars on her profile. What the hell are you going to do without even knowing what she looks like?” Shiki doesn’t catch the folder, and it falls harmlessly to the floor.

“I don’t need a file on this one. You’ve told me where it started, and

that's where we're gonna start too. We're all the same, us murderers: we attract each other. And when me and this girl meet, there's definitely going to be some blood on the floor afterwards."

And with a rustle of clothes, Shiki departs from the office, the coldness of her glare the last thing peeking in through the small gap of the closing door.

Lingering Rain - III

Though I really didn't want to resort to this, I am left without any other alternative. I decide to contact an old high school friend to see if I can borrow some money. I know what places he haunts. I go to the university I dropped out of not two months ago and wait for him in the cafeteria. Just a few minutes after noon, right on schedule, the large, imposing shadow of Gakuto comes into view, easy to pick out among the crowd smaller than him. Spotting me, he swaggers over to my table.

"Well, look who decided to come back! How you hangin', man? Here to stay for good this go around?"

"Unfortunately, no. School treating you well?"

"Ah, you know, this here's a game that needs to be played, so I play it. How about you? If I know you like I know you, you ain't gonna holler at me just for a social call. What's the trouble? How'd that job hunt go?"

"Great, actually. Got a job."

"So what's wrong?"

"The job," I reply dryly. "My generous employer has decided that she'll forego the usual paycheck this month, so that leaves me hanging in the wind."

Gakuto makes a face halfway between disappointment and genuine bemusement. "That ain't so bad, man. And here I was thinking it was gonna be some profoundly life changing shit, and you drag your broke ass all the way down here for extra dough? You sure you're not some alien in disguise?"

"Very funny. When you've got your back against a corner like this, you can expect the same hospitality."

"But to have money being the first thing out of your mouth; it just ain't like you. And anyway, ain't your folks supposed to have your back on this one?"

"Me and my parents haven't talked since the big fight we had when I stopped going to university. How can I go back to them right now like this? It'd be like surrendering."

"You got as thick a head as me sometimes, I give you that. Now, don't tell me you called your folks names and shouted in their faces or something?"

"I'll thank you to leave that out of the discussion and focus on the real topic. So are you gonna lend me some or aren't you?"

"Damn, man, you in a fighting mood today. But there ain't no need to be, 'cause I'm feeling awful generous. Plenty from our school called you a

friend back then, Mikiya, and that includes me. If I put it out that you're in need of cash, we'd all be pitching in to help. So don't worry, man. We got your back." Gakuto pats me on the shoulder. "Don't misunderstand, though, this ain't charity," he adds. "Friends gotta look out for each other, after all."

Seems Gakuto's got his own favor to ask as well. He looks over the crowd carefully to see if no one is listening in, then leans his head in closer to me and whispers.

"The short of it is that there's some youngin I want you to look for. Old junior from back in the day, actually. Seems he gone and had his ass caught up in some heinous shit, and he hasn't come home yet."

Gakuto continues to explain, mentioning the name of the person in question: Keita Minato. Gakuto knows him as a member of the bunch that got cut up last night in the bar, but apparently he's alive. Whereabouts unknown, but at a period of time after the time of the killings put out by the police, Keita called up a mutual friend of him and Gakuto. The friend then contacted Gakuto, saying Keita was acting strange and incoherent.

"He just kept shoutin' that he was gonna die and someone be hunting his ass down. After that, nuthin. Don't even answer his cell now. Guy who took the call says he was mixing his words and shit, sounding really doped up."

The fact that even a high school kid like Keita could purchase dope without us so much as being surprised was just a fact of the times. Many of the corners and alleys of mazelike Tokyo have quickly turned into open-air drug markets, proof of the increasingly high demand for stimulants and depressants that so many people turn to for the clarity and solace that they felt society could not give them. However, when you're the survivor of a mass murder and you feel that the killer is coming for you next, when you're a person like Keita Minato in other words, your next fix should really be the last thing on your mind.

"I kinda feel like I'm being thrown into the fire without a hose here. Do you really think I can survive talking to these hoppers on my own?"

"I've faith. You always been like a bloodhound, finding people with next to nuthin to go on."

"This Keita kid—does he often do drugs?"

"Far as I know, no. Only them corner boys killed last night were married to them acid blotters. But if what the friend's saying be for real, he might've had a change of heart. Come on man, you still can't search your head for Keita? He's that kid that like to tail around your ass some in high school!"

"I kinda have a vague idea, yeah..." During high school, there were some

juniors who liked to hang around me for some reason, possibly because of me being friends with cool kid Gakuto here. “Well, if he’s just having a really bad acid trip, then that’d be good...or at least better than what we’re suspecting,” I mention with a sigh. “Guess I got no choice if I want to live this month. I’ll check it out and see what I can do. Can you tell me about his friends? Contacts, connections, anything?”

Gakuto reaches into his pocket to retrieve a small notebook, as if he was just waiting for me to say it. There’re a lot of names, aliases, addresses for hang outs, and phone numbers in that notebook, which means a lot of ground to cover if I want this done quick.

“I’ll be in touch if I find out anything. If I manage to find him, I’ll try to see him protected as best as I can. That good?” By protection, I mean in the form of my detective cousin Daisuke. He didn’t have anything to fear from him. Daisuke’s the kind of guy that can let you go for a drug abuse charge if you were witness to a red ball murder, which this one could end up as, what with the mutilation and multiple homicide. Far as Daisuke was concerned, nabbing the users is small game and a waste of time. Gakuto nods his assent, thanks me, and gives me 20,000 yen to start me off.

Once me and Gakuto go our separate ways, I start to make my way to the crime scene. I’ll have to work this one at least vaguely similar to how cousin Daisuke works cases if I would have any chance of finding Keita. I know that I shouldn’t really get involved in this, but Gakuto was right. Friends have to look out for each other, after all.

I 2

The sound of a ringing phone resonates in my empty apartment. I screen the call, as I am wont to do when I'm tired, and sure enough, after five rings it switches to the answering machine with a beep. Cue his voice: familiar, yet still feels alien enough so soon after recovering from the coma.

"Morning, Shiki. Sorry to call you so early, but I've got a small favor to ask if it isn't too much trouble. Azaka and I promised to meet at a café near Ichigaya station called Ahnenerbe around noon, but something came up and it looks like I won't be able to go. You're free today, right? If you can, drop by there and tell her I'm not coming." The message ends there.

I roll my body sluggishly over to the bedside and take a look at my clock, a digital green "July 22, 7:23am" on its screen; not even four hours since I came home from my nightly outing. Christ, do I need sleep. I pull the sheets back over my head. The summer heat doesn't really bother me much. I've been able to deal well with the heat and cold ever since my childhood days, and it seems that trait carried over from my...previous life.

Just as sleep was about to take me again, the phone rang a second time. This time, when the answering machine picked up the message, it was a voice I knew, but definitely one you didn't want to hear at just half past seven in the morning.

"It's me. Watched the news this morning? Probably haven't. That's all right, I didn't either."

What the hell? It's always been at the back of my mind, but now I can definitely say that I have absolutely no idea what the fuck goes on in Tōko's head; it is an incomprehension that sometimes continues on to her speech more often than I'm comfortable. It requires at least a few precious seconds of cranial spelunking before you can start to understand what she's saying, a trait which always tends to leave you at a disadvantage when talking to her.

"Listen up. I'm gonna phrase this in a way even your sleep-deprived brain can process. Three interesting deaths last night. Another jumper that hit pavement, and some girl who killed her boyfriend. I know, I know, same shit, different day, right? But here's something that'll help you out:" she pauses. "Our little killer struck again."

Tōko hangs up abruptly, leaving me to wonder what she thought I would feel when confronted with these facts. Did she expect me to feel a rush of noble intention, and a renewed commitment to this job? How could I, when I still see the world I just awakened back into in a hazy grey veil, when

I am yet to even feel the world of my senses in a manner that seemed coherent and real? Harsh as it may be to admit, but the deaths of these people with no relation to me faze me less than the rays of the sun beating down on me.

After sleeping in for a while more, I get up much later, only when my fatigue finally gives ground. I cook breakfast in the manner that I remember, after which I start to dress. I choose a light orange kimono, which should be cooler if I'm going to walk around town all day. It's then that I get that feeling again, which causes me to bite my lip: a feeling that someone is watching me do all of this from afar. Even my wardrobe choice is one from a memory that I feel far removed from. I wasn't this way two years ago. The two years of emptiness created a rift, a boundary line between the past and now, as if creating two very different people, yet sharing the same collective memory. It felt as if the weight of that memory, those sixteen years of life before the accident, kept pulling the strings attached to me. I know it's probably just an after effect of the coma, some brain damage from the accident at the worst. I know that no matter how much I spit on this emptiness, this fabricated dollhouse of a lie, in the end, it's still me pulling those damn strings. Hell, maybe it's always been me.

By the time I finish dressing up it's almost eleven o' clock. I press the "Messages" button on my answering machine, repeating the first message.

"*Morning, Shiki...*," repeats the voice I have heard many times in the past.

Mikiya Kokutō. The last person I saw before the accident two years ago. The only person I trusted two years ago. I have many recollections of being with him, but all of it missing details, as if I was looking at a tampered photograph, something in them not squaring with what I know. And one memory is a gaping hole, completely gone: my last memory of him and the accident. Why was *Shiki* in an accident? Why was Mikiya's face the last thing I saw?

It's the reason I still feel awkward talking to Mikiya: I feel like I should know something important about him but it's missing in my head, and without it I won't be able to carry out an actual conversation without them. If only these memories lost to oblivion were stored in an answering machine too.

"...tell her I'm not coming." The answering machine stops and falls silent. It's probably just another after effect of the coma, but hearing his voice softens the annoying itch in my mind. Problem is, that's the itch that makes me feel alive. It's the itch that tells me to kill.

It's only a short forty minute walk to Ahenenerbe. The café sports their unusual German name on a sign hanging above the entrance, which I spare only a momentary glance at before entering the establishment. Once inside, I immediately notice the dearth of customers, despite it being noon, the hour when college kids frequent cafés to write a novel or do some other boring activity. The café has little lighting. Its sole sources of bright light come from the entrance and four rectangular windows placed on either side of the shop, admitting the sunlight and silhouetting the tables and customers sitting there in a dark, hard-cut outline. The tables further inside the shop aren't so lucky. It paints a nostalgic picture, as if some European middle ages tavern had stepped out of antiquity into the modern age.

I spot a pair of gaudily uniformed girls in a table way in the back, and a quick glance confirms that it is indeed Azaka Kokutō, along with another girl. Strange—Mikiya never mentioned another girl. Oh well, no biggie.

"Azaka," I call out, while walking briskly to their table.

Azaka herself is quite a character on her own. She goes to a fancy girl's boarding school, so she acts the part, complete with a tendency for being ladylike. But you take one look at the way she carries herself and you realize it's all an act. At her best, she has an amazingly competitive streak in her, as well as a boldness that is sorely lacking in many people these days. In contrast to her brother, who endears himself to people by sheer likeability and charm, Azaka is a figure who commands respect with a single, solid look in her eyes. Those eyes now turned to me as she does a quick about face at my voice calling out her name.

"Shiki...Ryōgi," she says, each syllable uttered and spat out like an insult. The lingering animosity towards me that she tries so hard to keep in is so palpable I can swear I almost feel the temperature rise. "I have a prior engagement with my brother. I have no business with you."

"And it seems your brother has a prior engagement of his own," I say, egging her on. "He said he can't come. You know, this might just be me, but I think you just got stood up."

A single restrained gasp. I don't know if she's shocked that Mikiya just treated their promise like trash, or the fact that it's coming from me and I came down here to tell her.

"Shiki, you...you put him up to this, didn't you?!" Azaka's hands tremble in barely suppressed anger. I guess it's the latter, then.

"Don't be an idiot. He's done his level best to piss me off too. I mean really, asking me to come all the way here just to send you away?"

Azaka glares at me with eyes full of fire. At that moment, her friend,

who has until now remained silent, interrupts; and a good thing too, since Azaka looks like she's about to abandon her carefully cultivated demeanor of placidity by seeing how well she could throw a teacup to my face at point blank range.

"Kokutō, everyone's staring," the girl says in a voice as slender as a wire.

Azaka looks around the café for half a beat, and then embarrassed, she sighs. "I'm sorry, Fujino. I don't know what came over me. I just ruined your day, didn't I?" she says apologetically. I haven't really looked at this Fujino clearly up until now. Though she and Azaka look somewhat similar by virtue of the uniform and their school's grooming standards, their demeanor cannot be more different. While Azaka has a hidden strength behind the prim and proper façade, her companion Fujino looks, at a glance, more fragile, as if she were sick and could collapse at any second.

"Are...you okay? You look kind of—", I involuntarily say. She answers only by looking in my direction. The way her eyes pass over me feels as if she's looking at something beyond me, like I was just an insect on the ground to be ignored. My gut tells me she's dangerous, and my mind itches again. My reasoning tells me that there's no way a girl like her could do anything like what happened to the victims in that underground bar, and the itch recedes. "Never mind, pretend I didn't say anything," I conclude.

That crime scene was the handiwork of someone who enjoyed murder, and a girl like this Fujino could be someone like that. Reason says her hands are too weak to twist and tear off their limbs like that anyway. I turn my attention away from her and back to Azaka.

"Well anyway, s'all I got to say. Seeing as I seem to be messenger for a day, is there anything you want to say to your brother?"

"Oh, you'd do that?" says Azaka, who then proceeds to clear her throat. "Then please communicate to Mikiya my desire for him to terminate relations with you. A woman the likes of you has no business being with my brother." Azaka leaves me a final, satisfied look before I go.

I 8

I watch as the girl in the orange kimono Azaka called Shiki Ryōgi walks out the front door of the café without incident. Their verbal sparring was tense, and I was sure that if they were armed, they'd have been at each other trying to score a cut across the other's jugular. While it didn't escalate to anything so dramatic, it still stifled me of all but one sentence.

That Shiki certainly had a...*particular* way of speaking. Azaka mentioned her surname as Ryōgi. If she is, as I suspect, a child of the Ryōgi dynasty, then that explains the unusually well-tailored kimono she wore.

"Lovely looking person, wasn't she?" I ask Azaka.

"Well, I suppose," she replies truthfully. That's Azaka for you. She'd argue with a person and cause a public commotion one second, and admit without shame the same person's better points the next.

"But only as lovely as she was frightening." I say this firmly, with no sarcasm or humor. "I don't like her." It catches both me and Azaka off guard, which is only natural. I rarely, if ever, react sharply to other people, after all.

"That's surprising. I thought you were the kind of person who wouldn't hate a dog even if it bit you, but I suppose I still have a lot to learn about you, don't I?"

Curiously, Azaka equated "hate" with "dislike", which to me are two very different concepts. I didn't hate Shiki Ryōgi. I only felt that she and I would never get along. My mind returns to the moment she and I locked eyes on each other. My eyes look over her black hair, her white skin, and the black emptiness in her eyes, all somehow ominous, as if looking at a cracked mirror, and seeing the distortion looking back on you, changed. We both saw what we were trying so desperately to hide behind our backs. She has the blood of many on her, and a predatory countenance. My gut tells me what I've been trying to avoid thinking: she is a killer, a cold-blooded murderer.

But I'm different. I'm better than her. I've never even so much as entertained any thought of murder. I say it to myself, in the dark, forbidden places of my mind, closing my eyes and calling it out repeatedly. Why, then, does she not disappear? It's as if, without even exchanging a single word, Shiki has been indelibly burned into memory.

"And this was supposed to be our day off too. I'm really sorry, Fujino." Azaka renews her plea. I smile my practiced smile. "It's all right. I wasn't really feeling up to it today, anyway."

"Well, you *are* looking kind of pale, though it's hard to tell what with your skin already being so white."

That wasn't the real reason for my lack of enthusiasm, but I nod my acknowledgement at Azaka all the same. More importantly, I know that my body is continuing a slow slide from bad to worse, but I didn't know that it had reached the point where it showed.

"There's nothing we can do about it today," says Azaka. "I'm just going to ask Mikiya myself, so why don't we head on back for now?"

"Thank you for the concern," I reply. "But wouldn't your brother be at least a little mad at what you just said to Shiki before she left?"

"Oh, it's nothing to worry about. This is probably the thousandth time I said it to him, so if he's gonna get mad at anything, it would just be me acting like a broken record about it. They say belief bends reality, so maybe if I believe it hard enough and repeat it over and over like a really pathetic curse, it'll come true, right?"

I don't know if she's serious or just having fun, but I'm already used to her being largely spontaneous, so I wouldn't at all be surprised if that's something she just made up to make herself feel better. With a consistent record as the top notcher in Reien Girl's Academy, and a similarly consistent placement on the national top ten rankings, it's easy to see how the stress of retaining her place can get to her.

Reien Girl's Academy provides education anywhere from the first grade to college level, and people usually go in there starting from first grade until they graduate college. People like Azaka and me, who come in after graduating high school, are quite rare. Both of us came from the same school, and we applied at the same time, making her one of my very few close friends in Reien. We usually go out on weekends and holidays to have fun, but today was supposed to have been something else entirely.

Enduring the events and the memories of the past few days has proven to be...difficult, and my depression isn't so easily willed away. In the midst of my difficulty, an old memory of mine came to mind. For some reason, I found myself thinking about an old upperclassman, one who of the few who talked to me when I was a freshman in a local junior high school. The memory comforted me when even the company of other people couldn't, and I cherish it.

When I told Azaka about it, she immediately jumped at the opportunity to try and find this upperclassman immediately. Apparently, her brother knows the neighborhood surprisingly well, and it's easy for him to search for anybody. The truth is, I wasn't too fond of bothering her brother like she suggested, but once Azaka sets out to do something, especially something she just decided in the space of a second, she follows through. Her brother not being able to come today is regrettable but is fortuitous in a way.

When I said I really didn't feel like it earlier, the truth of it was that I already met this fabled upperclassman two days ago. When I met him, I was finally able to say what I couldn't say three years ago. Maybe Azaka's brother not coming was God's way of finally putting a lid on the matter.

"Let's scram. I bet they're thinking of throwing our freeloading butts off their establishment just for drinking a single cup of tea and stealing a table for an hour." Azaka stands up, and even tries her best to hide how disappointed she is at her brother not being able to keep his promise. Azaka might have been acting the lady when she was talking to Shiki, but I'm one of those people she can be herself around, and at her worst times, she can talk like a sailor and lose all sense of formality. It's not that she's pretending to be something she's not, but it's just something she does unconsciously, like a filter she can use to weed out people who aren't worth her time.

Azaka is a true friend, probably my only one. She shouldn't be involved in what is about to happen, which is why we'll never see each other again.

"Azaka, you can go back to the dormitory without me. I think I'll sleep over at my parents' house tonight."

"You sure? I mean, I'm cool with it, but you're gonna get in trouble with the Directress if this becomes a habit. Don't let it happen too often, okay?" And with a flutter of her cassock, Azaka leaves the gloomily lit café.

When Azaka opens the door, my eyes suddenly catch the sign outside. "Ahnenerbe": "ancestral heritage" in German.

I never came to school again after what happened two nights ago. No doubt, the school has already contacted my father about my absence without leave. And when I come home, I will surely be subject to a strict questioning as to what I have been up to in the past two days. And, like a child who has finally acquiesced to the whipping, I will tell everything. My father will then probably disown me, all because I cannot craft a single convincing lie. Except for one lie, the one I told Azaka. That was simple and easy. Not like home. Now I'll never have a home to return to. Home, and each and every part of it, is a lie.

My father now is mother's second husband. The problem stems from the fact that I come from the first. My father only wanted the house, land, and title that my mother's family would bring him, and to him I was just a bonus, an extra, a spare. This consideration of my status led me to try harder, to be a woman of faithfulness and virtue like my mother, to be a model student my father could be proud of, to be a normal girl anyone could trust. I wanted to be that girl so much, not for anyone's sake, but for myself. It

was an ambition that drove me and, like a charm, protected me, as much from my father as it did from forcing me to think about a better life.

But the lie is over now. Whatever magic that unreachable dream granted me for protection is now forever lost.

The sun slowly descends to rest, its light now visible only in the gaps between the buildings, and it casts long, parallel shadows in the streets of the darkening city where I continue to walk. The wave of people coming and going, walking the streets in a great roiling mass, the traffic lights blinking red to green to red again; I walk amongst all of them. Here and there, among both the young and the old, you can see happy faces, picturesque expressions of joy all around, and my heart tightens at the sight. It's all like a dream, another lie.

On a whim, I pinch my cheek, and feel nothing. I pinch harder, twisting skin.

Nothing.

When I look at my hands, I see red on my fingertips. Even though I dug my nails deep enough to draw blood, I still feel nothing, no spark of life. I laugh, the exhalation coming out in little fits and starts.

Is it the soul that hurts when I saw the smiles of passersby, or is it, as when people try to hurt me with words, really my brain firing neurons to generate a predisposed reaction from me? A flash of pain to make you understand that bad things are happening and it needs to stop. Whatever the source of the pain, whether rejection, abuse, self-defense, or some other cause, all these are already after the fact, and whatever justification your brain creates for the pain is just like any other drug, a function to make you feel better, to sober your soul about what was done, and what has been done to you.

Though I do not know the common pain, I understand the wounds of the soul, and the pain that comes with it. But that particular breed of pain is hardly important, nothing more than a fleeting delusion you entertain, because the pain of the soul is easily dispelled with the right words from the right person speaking them, massaging them into a lie, and you forget the pain because it was so trivial. Real pain is not so easily remedied, because as long as the wound remains, the pain continues its course, throbbing, pulsating, and proving if nothing else, that you are alive.

If the soul were real, if my soul could be touched, then maybe the wounds on it can be real too, and pain, real pain, would follow. Like on that night, when those boys violated me. I still remember: their low voices of laughter, the shadows on their faces flickering in the light of the alcohol lamp.

Threats—

Shouting—

Accusations—

Being violated—

I remember the man lying on top of me, clutching something in his hand raised above his head. It caught the light, and for an instant I saw the glint of steel. I remember it falling fast, swung downward. Afterwards, I felt a warm sensation in my stomach, and when my eyes looked downwards, I see my uniform torn in the abdomen and wet with blood. After that, a haze of violence and carnage, dealt not by them, but by me, my own doing. I end their little lives and realize that the warmth in my stomach was what they truly called pain.

My heart tightens again. An ethereal voice spoke in my ear, but it sounds as if it's coming from my own head. It tells me that there is no mercy, no forgiveness, and it repeats over and over. My legs buckle, and the warmth in my belly, now more like a scalding fire, comes again; an unseen hand clutching my insides in an ever tightening grip.

The nausea is overwhelming, more so than usual. I should be slipping into unconsciousness by now. An arm goes numb, almost as if it was suddenly taken away, and only by looking at it do I know it's still firmly attached to my shoulder.

It hurts...so much.

Now, I know I am alive.

The stab wound that I know has been healed now suddenly burns again. In a childhood long gone, my mother once told me that the pain would go away once the wound heals. But now even that is a lie. Even after the bleeding stops and the skin sews itself back on, the pain remains.

But mother, I don't know if you understand, but I like this burning sensation. There is no greater object that makes me realize I am indeed alive! This is the lingering pain that I can be sure is no fleeting delusion.

"I need to find him...quickly," I whisper to myself, the words coming out in rapid, ragged bursts. The score must be settled, and the life of the boy who escaped must be taken. It is the last thing I want to do, but there is no other choice, if I don't want to be hunted down myself as a murderer. And now that I finally have the pain I craved for so long, it would be a shame to end it like that. No, I'll have more of this, this pleasure of finally feeling alive.

My body moans and screams with an ache when I move it, but nevertheless I manage to start dragging myself to those corner boys' usual haunts. Tears start to form and fall from my eyes from the sharp pain, but right now, even the pain is almost like a beloved companion.

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I go back to my apartment after my little parley with Azaka, trying to catch up on my sleep. Only at night do I go out again. So far the job Tōko hired me for is still in its early stages, and yet only two days after it adds a fresh corpse to its tally, making it a total of five bodies so far: four in the underground bar that started this whole mess, and the one that Tōko said showed up last night, apparently at some random construction site in the same neighborhood. I don't really see it being related to the four originals. But then, Mikiya did say to me once that these people tended to know each other at least on a cursory basis if they're in the same neighborhood. They're hoppers, alley kids, and drifters that are slinging, buying, and playing the same game night after night, after all, he said. If so, last night's fatality may have known the bodies in the bar, at least by name or reputation.

My attention drifts back to the girl Azaka was with at Ahnenerbe. I'm still mostly groping in the dark with the brand-new capabilities of my Eyes, so I ended up accidentally seeing her lines—the traces of death that ran over all things—when I looked straight at her. That was careless, even for me. She looked normal enough, very much like your average stuck up rich kid. But she was hiding blood in her past; of that much I'm sure. Her eyes told her story well enough: hers was a liminal existence, tied by one fragile string to one side of her life, and being pulled like a metal to a magnet to the other, as if she belongs there. I mean, fuck, of all people, I should know the feeling.

We read each other like two predators back there, and my gut tells me she's the one, but I can't entirely be sure. I don't see, or at least I don't yet see, a reason for her being someone who enjoys murder as much as I do. But then, since when did killers in this town start needing a reason to enjoy killing?

Hah, "enjoy killing." I wonder what Mikiya would think if he heard me saying that. He'd probably give me a stern telling-to, saying "murderin' be a purty steep crime, Shiki" while waving a finger in front of me.

What an utter idiot, I muse, as much to myself as to Mikiya who must be half-way across town right now.

Mikiya once said to me that I haven't changed from before. I wonder, then, if I was always like this even before the accident: walking around town aimlessly, a woman a little off her rocker searching for something to kill.

I try to tell myself that no, *Shiki* never had any liking for this sort of

stuff, or if she had, it certainly wasn't in her laundry list of priorities. This was always **Shiki's** line of thinking. **Shiki**, the man—yin, dwelling inside *Shiki*, the woman—yang. But then, where does that put me? **Shiki** was here before, but he's gone now. Dead, probably, or something like it. Then that means this desire to kill isn't anything else but my own, and I can't let some other personality take the fall for it. Tōko had the right of it I suppose. This case does fit me like a glove. I mean, holy shit, I get to kill someone with no strings attached!

It's almost midnight. I ride the subway to a station I rarely get off at. The city is sleepless tonight, the noise rising to the all too common chorus of the streets: the melody of traffic and speeding cars; and then the background vocals: the shouting and arguments echoing in the streets; and now the percussions: the sound of bats and pipes and knives, setting the tempo by claiming their share of screaming victims; and then the main vocals: the siren wail of the police rollers; and always, the footsteps are there, in some places a scattered rhythm, in some a low rumble, all of them here in this labyrinthine city.

Here, from the exit of the station, I can see the tall cargo cranes and stacks of shipping containers, themselves as tall as a house or larger, that reveal the short distance to the port.

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I don't know where the last one ran off to, but I've thought of a way to solve that problem. I was taken to a lot of places by those men. They had hangouts scattered all over the neighborhood, places where they could unwind before they did me. I might find out where the last one is hiding by going back to these places and asking the people he knows there. They must know. He can't rely on his parents, or his school, or the police, so he has no other recourse but his own kind.

Walking the city at night is something I've never gotten used to, and a little part of me keeps saying that I should just go home and not bother with going to these shady night dens, but the pain and the filthy memories propel my feet step by step.

At a large karaoke bar, the third place I visited tonight, I finally manage to meet a person who claims to be a friend of Keita Minato. An employee of the establishment, he lets slip a dirty smile when we talk, and suggests that we go to a quiet place to talk. Ditching his shift, we walk again. The little voice tells me that this is another trap, another game we play before he jumps me like the others. He knows how weak I am. He can smell it, and the smile he made while we were talking was him reading me as easy prey. He must know what Keita Minato and his friends did to me, and he thinks he can do it too. That's why he hasn't a worry on his mind right now. Even knowing all this, I ignore the voice and follow him. He's my only chance at finding my lost one, and I'm not going to pass it up.

We arrive at a lonely stretch of road. I grip my burning stomach even tighter, and prepare myself.

It's almost midnight. For the hundredth time tonight, I summon the memory of me being violated, and my conviction is renewed, my steps unyielding. The city whispers again tonight, the noise coming together in its regular volume: the shudders in the air from the breaths of the pained, the sighing release of the dying, and the whispers of the dead. This is a place that bleeds, suffers, and dies every night, and for a moment I come to an understanding with this labyrinthine city.

Here in this barely lit strip of road with this wretched man, I can see the warehouses and silos, black silhouettes towering in the sky, that reveal the short distance to the port.

Luck's on his side tonight, thinks the young man. Keita and his buddies were a talkative bunch, always consummate loudmouths talking about the rich girl they kept banging over and over again every week. For his part, the young man had long since resigned the matter to the back part of his brain where he could filter out all their voices as just meaningless background noise, just part of their routine. What they did in their spare time was their business, not his, always had been. Keita and his group weren't anyone special, and every one had grown up in a different corner of the hood anyway, so it wasn't his job to butt in, and anyway the story had sounded suspiciously embellished right from the start so he tended to take it with a grain of salt in the first place. But then, the girl coming to his job on his shift was just too irresistible a treat.

Oh sure, he knew she was the girl they were talking about. She fit the bill exactly: rich girl from a rich kid school. Now, on a regular occasion, he'd be on a payphone right now telling his crew about the find, to share the fun. But as good a friend as he was, this was not an opportunity that necessitated a lot of people. This was not, in other words, the kind of easy alley gang bang he and four other boys would occasionally engage in. It's a whole different ball game this time, seeing as he recognizes the girl as family to the owners of Asagami Construction, the daughter if he remembered correctly. They're the kind of upper crust clan who put a premium value on appearances and the gossip about them in the local patrician society. Raping this girl and threatening to divulge the dirty details to the public later, maybe even with some carefully selected photos, was as good as him dipping his hands into the family wallet himself; for this is a family that would sooner settle the matter with money than drag the whole scandal through the publicity of a trial. That's why he didn't call his friends tonight. To him, this was a case of too many cooks spoiling the broth.

This is a solid caper, thinks the young man; a caper Keita and those dumb fuckers never thought of. Despite being the leader of a semi-famous crew in the neighborhood, the man Keita and the others followed were so dumb they probably couldn't figure out which way to point a gun if they shot themselves looking down the barrel.

Fujino Asagami keeps pace with the man without a single word. It almost makes him a little nervous. Bad idea to bring her to the usual places, he thinks, so he heads to the warehouse section of the harbor. There's little light, and at this midnight hour, the longshoremen would be home and there'd be no one guarding the place. When they enter the dark spaces between the tall warehouses, he finally turns to face the girl. The sound of the waves and the faint traces of light coming from the Broad Bridge

construction site nearby compound to the uneasiness of Fujino's silence, but the man shrugs it away.

"This should be far enough," he mutters. "So, what did you wanna ask about?" He figures he might as well answer Fujino's question. Not letting her voice her question, after all, would be in bad form.

"Er, yes. Would you happen to know where Mr. Keita is now?" she finally says after a full five-second delay. Through all of this Fujino hadn't been making eye contact with the man. Her eyes, half-obscured by her well-kept bangs, were downcast and seemed to alternate in interest between the one hand she had on her stomach and the floor.

"Nah, girl, Keita ain't been seen 'round here last few days. I heard he ain't even got a place of his own, so he bounce around, crashing in a different crib every week with his peoples. Far as I know, he ain't got a cell either, so you can't connect with him."

"No...I can contact him."

She's talking weird. She doesn't know where Keita is even though she can contact him? Did those guys fuck her so much her brain shut off or something? That should make things a lot smoother for business later, but he had to admit he'd been expecting a little resistance. He likes his girls with fight in them.

"Oh, well, cool then," he responds. "Then why dontcha just ring him up and ask then?"

"That is...well...it seems Mr. Keita doesn't want to tell me where he's hiding. That's why I'm looking all over and asking his friends. Please, I'd only like an answer. It's perfectly fine if you don't know."

"Wait, hold the fuck up. Whatchoo mean he's hiding? He gone and got hisself into some deep shit, ain't he?"

She was beginning to irritate him. Having not seen the news himself, he considers for a moment the possibility that Keita raping Fujino had leaked out somehow, a thought easily dismissed when he realizes that, were that the case, it wouldn't be Fujino herself coming for Keita, but the cops with a wagon and a waiting interview room downtown.

"Oh, I see what this about now, girl. Now that Keita's gone and dumped you, you come hollering for another man, am I right?" The smile which never left his face now turns into amused laughter. If he was really lucky tonight and Fujino became his woman, he might not even need threats to get the money. She's no slouch in the looks either. Money and a woman: what else could he call this but the Almighty himself putting some polish in his life?

"We probably shoulda rolled over to my place. Or are you fine doing it

here?"

The girl in the black uniform nods. "I'd like an answer before that," she says.

"Bitch, shut yo mouth with that excuse. I mean, like I know where he crashing at before he shoot up. I dunno, and I ain't got a yearning to know."

Fujino looks up, a content look on her face. Her eyes hold no warmth now, save for a faint light in her pupils that was not there before, a light that shines like a spiral. All normality seems to have left it. For his part, the man is less focused on her eyes and more on the odd situation that is taking place on one of his arms, which has started to move by itself. His elbow starts to turn, the flesh there contorting, slightly at first but then more severe, in the manner of something being twisted. A small creaking sound of the bone accompanies the elbow twisting past the ninety degree mark, but it doesn't stop there. Within another moment, it finally breaks with a single popping noise.

The young man manages a short, piercing shriek, his voice slipping out like gas from a balloon at first, but then growing into a scream when his arm breaks. Earlier he had kept praising his luck, but he's one of those who can't distinguish between the good and the bad kind, and whatever amount of good luck he had tonight has definitely run out.

In this narrow alleyway between two warehouses untouched by moonlight, the first stirrings of tragedy begin to unfold.

Since the first twist, the man's scream has gone from recognizably human to something resembling the baying of some beast. His arms don't even look like arms anymore. They're more like wire puzzles, or one of those rubber bands twisted around to make paper airplanes fly. At any rate, they're not going to go back to anything resembling functioning arms any time soon.

"H-h-help!" he shouts in vain. He tries to run away from the girl, who only stands still before him, but finds his efforts to do so are hampered by his right leg suddenly being torn to a bloody pulp from the knee, and his body stumbling into air and slamming into pavement. Blood scatters with a sickening splat, as if someone emptied a bucket full of it on the concrete walls, the spatter looking like some obscene piece from a modern art museum. Fujino Asagami, with eyes lighted by some flickering flame of spiral behind them, watches the entire scene unfold.

"A...screw, she's sc—, she's screwing me, haha!" His words are almost unintelligible. Somehow, amidst the blinding pain, he finds the will to laugh

at his own private joke. Fujino decides to ignore him and continue.

"Bend," she whispers softly, like a curse, the same curse she's been using since she started this. Her friend once told her that belief bends reality, that repeating something over and over like a curse might cause it to come true.

The man is squirming on the ground, with both arms twisted and with one less leg, moving his head from side to side. The blood flowing from the open leg has formed a red carpet on the ground, welcoming Fujino. She steps into the carpet, her shoes dipping into it slightly. The sweet fragrance of the blood around her resembled the hot, humid, and sticky air of the summer so much. She emits a sigh as she looks down at the writhing mass of flesh before her. That she has to do this is regrettable, detestable even, but necessary, something she had intended to do right from the start. Fujino knew from the way he was hitting on her that he was yet to be enlightened by what happened at that underground bar. But it was only a matter of time before he did, and when that happened, he would also remember Fujino asking about Keita Minato. It wouldn't take long before he put two and two together, and start to suspect Fujino, maybe even report her to the police. So this is something she truly has to do. And that besides, the man had been asking for it. Though it was indirect, this is nothing less than her revenge against the ones that violated her. Luckily, her ability to violate *them* turns out to be much more potent.

"Forgive me—but I have no choice." The young man's remaining left leg is ripped to shreds in a manner similar to its counterpart. The man, who had been hanging onto a small thread of life earlier, expires with a final convulsion that continues even after his death. Before, Fujino would look at a body like this and she wouldn't feel a shred of empathy. But now, having finally known pain, she understands, and she sympathizes, and she is glad. She knows now that to live is to feel pain.

"Only through this can I finally be normal."

She was the one who made the man this way. She was the one who hurt him. She is better than him, than all of them. This is what it means to live, Fujino thinks; to be able to celebrate true happiness only in the midst of such cruelty and suffering by becoming cruel as well.

"Mother, am I no longer human for going this far?"

The burning in Fujino's stomach has become almost unbearable as her heart pumps blood faster and faster, the beating the only thing she hears. Despite the summer heat, a shiver worms its way up her spine.

"I never wanted to murder people—"

"Oh, I beg to differ."

Fujino turns towards the sudden intruder. Silhouetted against the moonlight reflected off the harbor waters, a single kimono-clad figure stands in the entrance of the narrow alley: Shiki Ryōgi.

"Miss...Shiki?"

"Fujino Asagami, huh? It's all in the name. I should have known you were related to the Asakami dynasty." Lightly, Shiki starts to walk towards the alley interior. With narrowing eyes, she observes the scene of carnage around her.

"When did you—", Fujino starts to ask, but she already knows the answer.

"Ever since you lured that lump of meat out here, I was watching the whole time," Shiki says coldly. That means she saw everything. She saw it but didn't try to stop it. Even knowing what would happen, she revealed herself, ensuring that only one question races through Fujino's mind: why?

"He is not a lump of meat!" says Fujino angrily, thinking Shiki's casual callousness going too far, even despite her own thoughts earlier. "He is—was—a human being."

"You sure? 'Cause, at least to my understanding, he doesn't look too much like one right now. Fact is, you butchered him, and he didn't die like a human at all." Shiki continues to advance, her pace quickening with each step, boots clicking with each advance. "He probably was human before, but humans don't end their life that way. It's a death removed from all boundaries of common sense, and it deprives him of all meaning. You deprived him of all meaning. You chopped him up good and proper just like a, well...like a lump of meat. Good entertainment, though."

The declaration makes Fujino truly disgusted at Shiki, a more potent loathing than before. She says that both Fujino and the corpse are not normal, an aberration, when if anything she herself is abnormal, considering the way she observes the scene with an eyebrow cocked, as if this was the grandest excursion of her life.

"No!" Fujino declares loudly. "I'm normal, unlike you!"

Shiki only responds with curious laughter. "Trust me, Fujino, we're more alike than you know. We're birds of a feather."

"And I don't believe you." Fujino's eyes now fixate on Shiki, and soon enough the power she had when she was just a child starts to manifest. Her vision of Shiki becomes strangely distorted and warped—she need only will it now to make it real. But as suddenly as it comes, it fades away and dies. Both of them are surprised: Fujino at her ability losing focus, and Shiki at Fujino's sudden change.

"Again?! What the fuck is up with you tonight?" Shiki asks, voice rising.

She scratches her head at the wasted opportunity. “I could’ve killed you right before now. Hell, I could’ve done it in the café. What a waste. You’re useless to me right now.” After saying thus, Shiki turns on her heels and walks away, the sound of her boots starting to echo as she goes farther.

“Listen, if I were you, I’d cut my losses and go home,” Shiki calls back to Fujino. “That way we won’t have to see each other again.” After a few moments, her silhouette too, disappears behind a building, leaving Fujino still standing dumbstruck at the red carpet of blood. She was back to the way she was before. Without pain. She looks down at the corpse again, and finds that she can no longer feel what she had felt earlier. The wellspring of pain she had felt was again gone, leaving only the memory of the crime, and the words of Shiki Ryōgi, echoing like an accusation. We’re birds of a feather.

“No. I’m different...from you,” she murmurs repeatedly, like another curse. How she wished it was true. She hates what she is doing, and she trembles at the possibility of having to repeat the process just to find Keita Minato, for she truly feels, in her conflicted mind, that murder is the most unforgivable of sins.

On Fujino’s blood tinted reflection on the pavement, a little smile plays across her face.

Lingering Rain - IV

As the first rays of sunlight mark the early morning of July 23rd, I finally learn the whereabouts of Keita Minato. It definitely took some doing: a whole day of asking his friends and acquaintances, and from there, his contacts, and then determining his usual turf and narrowing it down to the hard-to-find nooks where he could hide. A whole day of good, straightforward street work, in other words, to determine that he had apparently made a long vacant room in a run-down six floor apartment tower in the uptown projects his new home away from home. Right now, I stand outside the front door of this room. A doorbell is affixed beside the door, and I am surprised to find that it still works when I press it.

"Keita Minato," I call out with a voice loud enough to carry inside. "I've been looking for you for a mutual friend. Hope you don't mind me coming in."

After a few seconds of waiting with no reply, I try the door, which turns out to be unlocked. I walk inside, careful not to make any startling noises. I pass a short and narrow corridor before coming to a wider space which I can only assume was designed to be the living room, but judging by its lack of any object related to a living room, or indeed any object at all, casts some doubts on my assumption. No light is turned on, and only little cracks in the closed windows illuminate the wooden floor with thin streaks of sunlight. The floor creaks with each step, despite my efforts to prevent it. I can see two other rooms from where I am, probably a kitchen and a bedroom, though from what I can see, the kitchen is in a similar state as the living room, empty and barely lit by sunlight. The bedroom door is closed, however, which makes it the first place I search.

I open the door to the bedroom and enter to find it in absolute darkness, the storm shutters on the windows sealing them tight and preventing any light from coming in. At the opening of the door I hear a tiny gasp of breath from within. Only the bare token of light from the living room allows me to see what's inside: an empty room, like a box, all furniture replaced by convenience store food plastic where cockroaches have taken residence, a single cellphone on the floor, and a young man, the one who gasped earlier, who looks to be about sixteen years of age.

"Keita Minato, I presume. I have to say, staying cooped up here'll kill you, not to mention the charge you're gonna get for squatting."

He scrabbles on his hands and feet backwards to the wall opposite the door. While it's only been three days since the incident, his face is already

thin, almost emaciated, with hollowed-out cheeks and bloodshot eyes. It's obvious he hasn't had a single hour of sleep between now and three days ago. I know Gakuto's friend said that he was taking drugs, but you don't need drugs to turn out like this. The recipe is all in the facts: a bloody tragedy he wants to forget, and a need to hide. So he locks himself up in this room, shuts the windows tight, waits in the darkness, and hopes for the best...and slowly goes insane from the post-traumatic stress while doing so. It's a move of desperation, but it's worked for him for three days so far.

"Who's there?" he says with a quivering voice. I only take two steps inside before I stop, careful not to provoke him into rash action. In his current state, he's liable not to trust anyone, so I decide to try just talking to him for now to calm him down. "I said who's there?" he repeats, this time with more aggression. I raise my hands to indicate I'm not a threat.

"Relax, I'm a friend of Gakuto. We were schoolmates back in high school, too. Remember anyone named Mikiya Kokutō?"

"Kokutō...Mikiya Kokutō? That you?" I must be the last person on his mind he ever expected to find him here. It takes a few seconds for him to recover from the shock, but when he does, he starts to cry. "Wh—why did you come here?"

"A favor for the big guy. He asked me to go and find you, you know? We're both worried you've gotten yourself dragged into something way out of your league." I risk another step forward, but it only makes him shake his head violently.

"No, nonono. I can't go out. Not now. I'll die."

"You'll die if you keep staying here too." Keita's eyes widen and start to look at me with slight animosity. I produce a cigarette from my pocket, light, then smoke it. I'm not a smoker, but it's a gesture that often makes you look composed and makes other people relaxed, obviously something I need right now. "I know what happened," I say while exhaling a puff of smoke. "Keita, you know who did it, don't you?"

He keeps his silence. "Then you won't mind if I just talk to you for a while, right?" I say. "On the 20th, you and your friends were at the Mirage Bar at night, when it was raining. There's lots of stories about what you've all been up to, but I think I can put together the gist of it. Don't worry, the police don't know yet. Rule of the street is that everyone lies to a cop, after all." Despite me saying this, Keita now displays a different type of fear from before, the fear common to all who committed a crime that'll land them on a life sentence or a death penalty if they were found out. "Guess what? Someone saw you go into that bar that night, and he told me that there weren't just five of you. You had a girl with you, a high school student. I

don't know her name yet, but it's only a matter of time. Now unless she can pull herself up from being stone dead, her corpse wasn't present in that bar when the detectives got there. And that girl hasn't told the cops, and hasn't been seen since that night. Now is there anything you might want to tell me about her?"

"I ain't...I don't know what you're talking about."

"Fine, then. You did it. Expect a wagon in ten minutes."

"Wait—no! I didn't do it! There's no way I could have!"

"Yeah, I thought so. So the girl really was there, wasn't she?" Keita nods after a few moments. "But then we have a different problem. We're looking at something that a girl couldn't have done alone. You sure you weren't drugged?"

"No. We ain't stoned at the time."

"Keita, I don't need to tell you it's impossible for a girl to dismember the bodies of four guys."

"But that's what went down!" he shouts indignantly. "I ain't lying. I been thinking she was weird from the start, but man, she was crazy! She was like a monster!" His teeth chatter as he covers his face with his hands and recalls what happened. "She just stood there, calm like, while everyone was being twisted and torn apart. I heard their bones snapping and breaking, while I was there scared shitless. When two of my friends bought it, I came to my senses and booked it the hell out of there. That Fujino Asagami bitch ain't normal. If I'd stayed there, she'd have killed me too!"

His voice says it all. It's all too obvious with these sorts of people: a classic case of sudden role reversal between the predator and prey. There's no better way for you to feel the difference between the killer and the victim than to become the other one, and Keita certainly felt that difference keenly that night. As for his story, well, it's certainly one of the stranger ones out there: a person who can twist and bend things just by looking at them. Just a few months ago I would have discounted this story as an insane rant at worst and an outright lie at best, but since becoming acquainted to Shiki and her newfound Eyes, as well as Miss Tōko the mage, I don't know what I can deny as fictional anymore. Putting that aside for now, there's still one thing that bothers me.

"All right, I believe this story of yours about this Fujino being the killer," I say. Unsurprisingly, Keita is shocked.

"You...you do?" Keita stutters. "But anyone would say that's a fucking lie! Please, say it's a lie and tell me I just snapped and people like her don't exist!"

"Sorry, but...well, let's just say I get to know the strangest people. Don't

try and think too hard on it. But what did you mean when you said Fujino was weird from the start?" Keita slowly seemed to be slipping into a more stable state of mind. His shoulders aren't so tense anymore.

"Ah, yeah...yeah, she was weird because...it was like she was lagging behind, you know? Like she was actin' in a play and her reactions was always late. Even when the Boss was threatening her, her mug ain't change one bit. We shoot her up with some of the good stuff, and it's the same story. Even when we beat the bitch up she look like she ain't feeling it."

When I was looking for Keita, a lot of the people I asked told me about the girl and how Keita's group had been treating her, but now when he comes out with a confession, it leaves me stunned at how brutally they treated her, not to mention how casual Keita is about it. What this Fujino girl did is simply her long-awaited revenge against those who had been raping her for half a year. Had these men been caught and arrested, it is likely they would be convicted, but with some of them minors, and others close to that age, it's also highly likely a competent lawyer can cut their sentences down to something more manageable than life without parole. Minors like Keita can't even get a sentence without parole. And in a decade or two they're back on the streets. Most police, even the relatively considerate ones, would protest such an outcome. Some would say they deserve the noose. And this Fujino girl, judging from the ferocity of her murder, would definitely feel that that sentence would be the farthest thing from justice. But what's right in your gut and what's right to the law are both bedfellows who sleep with daggers beside them: occasional allies, but more often enemies. That's why there is little to be done about it.

"The girl looked mighty fine," Keita continues, "but doing her wasn't any fun. It was like fucking a doll. But—yeah, there was a time when that changed. This happened real recent. One of my friends is this crazy asshole who got his kicks by beating the shit out of the bitch over and over and seeing her not react. He change it up that day; brought a metal bat with him. He whacked her upside the back, and her face was like, all twisted up 'cause of the pain. I was actually kinda relieved, you know? Because then I knew that you could actually hurt her. I remember that night 'cause that was the one night where she act like a human...to everything we did."

"Alright, that's enough. Shut the hell up." Holy shit. It was getting harder and harder to just listen to this guy without doing something to him. "I get what you're trying to say, so enough, alright? My cousin's a city cop who can protect you. Right now, the lockup is probably the second safest place for you. Don't worry, I won't tell him anything about what you did." I approach him and urge him to stand up, but it only makes him retreat

towards the wall behind him even further, his earlier uneasiness returning.

"No! I ain't going to no cops and I ain't going to no court. Even then, she'll kill me if I go out. If I'm just gonna end up in some cop's body bag in pieces, I'll take my chances here!"

"She'll kill you?" That's a bit weird. If he goes out, Fujino will have to find him first. It's a bit too early to say he's going to get killed, unless...he was being watched. It's only at that moment that the cellphone on the floor beside Keita draws my attention.

"Fujino Asagami is calling you, isn't she?" He flinches again at the sound of the name, a sign of his quickly returning panic. "Does she know about you being here?"

"I don't know," he answers with a queasy voice. "I had the Boss' phone when I ran. She called me after a while, telling me that she got everyone, that I was next, that she'd find me. That's why I need to hide!"

"Why haven't you dumped that phone in the nearest gutter?" I ask, though I think I already know the answer.

"Cause she said she was gonna kill me if I threw it away! She said if I didn't wanna die, then I should keep it, 'cause she was gonna let me go as long as I had it!" Uh oh, he's becoming more and more hysterical. "She calls me every night, the crazy little bitch! She said she met Akino two days ago, and then Köhei yesterday. She said she killed them in exchange for me. She said 'isn't this good for you?' like she was singing it. Said if I value my friends' lives, then I should come out and see her, but why the fuck would I do that, right?"

He starts giggling like a madman. I can't imagine what it must have been like for him, getting calls every night, the topic always about how another friend died because of him. I can almost hear her voice through the phone.

I couldn't find you today, so I killed another of your friends in your place. Come out if you don't want any more of your friends to die.

It's fine if you don't, but I'll keep killing, and sooner or later, I'll find you.

"What should I do, Mikiya? I don't wanna die, not like the others. They were screaming and screaming while blood was leaking out of their necks and spilling outta their mouths like a towel being wrung!"

"You need to start by throwing away the phone. She's doing this to gloat. If she can't get to your head, then her killing anyone is meaningless."

"Ain't I getting through to your head? I can't! Keeping this phone is my last chance at living!"

"She killed two people exactly because she knows you're still keeping it. And besides, you'll end up dead either way if you stay like this, locked up in this empty room." I approached Keita, who at this point had wrapped

his arms around his legs in a fetal position, and pull him up by the arm. I discard my cigarette, smothering it with my shoe.

"Mikiya, please stop. The end is coming for me, and it probably be best if you left me alone." Then, as soon as he declares this with finality, he recants just as quick and offers a new plea. "Oh nonono, I don't wanna be alone anymore. Please, you gotta help me!" The phone calls must have really gotten to his head if he's alternating between two polar thoughts like this.

"Don't worry, I will. I'm not giving you over to the police. I'm gonna take you to the safest place in the city that I know, trust me." No one else can shelter Keita except Miss Tōko right now. I'll have to put my trust in her as well. With that, I drag Keita out of the apartment and we head as fast as we can to Miss Tōko's end of town.

Lingering Rain - V

I arrive at Miss Tōko's office to find Shiki there as well. Me bringing an outsider into Miss Tōko's office quickly sends her into a panic, but I explain the situation as fast as I can, and she begrudgingly accepts Keita Minato's plea for shelter. She takes him to her bedroom to let him sleep on a sofa, and returns quickly to the office room where me and Shiki waited, me sitting in the office room couch and Shiki leaning with her back to a wall. Both of us say nothing until Miss Tōko is seated on her own chair. Then, almost as if they had planned to beforehand, they say in unison:

"You big softy."

"Yeah, I knew something like that was coming my way," I reply.

"If you knew, then you should have had some second thoughts about getting involved. You are *such* an easy mark for these people."

"Well, what did you expect me to do, ma'am, leave someone to die? You know the circumstances."

Miss Tōko only responds with a curt wave of dismissal. She might be a bit annoyed, but I know her well enough to say that she's not the kind of person who callously throws away an opportunity to help a person in real need. Keita would surely be safe here, under Miss Tōko's many means of protection, and if I had to suffer her mild disappointment, then so be it. Shiki is a different story, however. She'd objected vehemently earlier when I brought Keita in, saying that this would only complicate matters, but Miss Tōko had overruled her. I can practically feel the angry eyefuck she's throwing my way.

"Well, this is a special case, considering the circumstances," Miss Tōko says. "What do you plan on doing now? Don't tell me you're going out to find Fujino Asagami and try to persuade her."

"Realistically speaking, we can't hide Keita Minato forever," I reply. "Fujino Asagami won't stop the murders until he finds her, and that's unacceptable. I think the best course of action now would be to meet with her and talk things over."

At this, Shiki finally talks. "You know the reason we say you're an easy mark? This is pretty much it. You're living in fantasy land if you think that's going to work." While Shiki has never been one to massage her words when she felt the need to talk, she was being especially antagonistic today. She really must be angry at me. "You're not gonna get through to her head, I'm telling you," she continues. "That girl's too far gone. She won't stop even if she does get to Keita. He's just an excuse to keep killing at this point, and

when she's done with him, she'll find another excuse just as convenient."

"Yeah, right, as if you know her."

"Oh, but I do, and met her to boot. Azaka brought her along to Ahnen-erbe yesterday."

That catches me by surprise. How would Azaka know Fujino? The people I talked to placed her around or above high school age, so it's possible she could be studying at Reien Girl's Academy. Wait a minute—

"It's a bit of a surprise that you're behind on this one, Kokutō," Miss Tōko declares. "You still haven't made any inquiries about Fujino Asagami?"

"I hope you'll excuse me for not looking into a person I just heard of not two hours ago, ma'am. I can't very well drag a person with me around town while a known killer is looking for him." Something bothers me, and not just because Azaka keeps terrible company and could have been involved, but something else, like when you keep remembering something you want so hard to put out of your mind. "So does this mean that she's still going to school?" I ask. "Why don't we just ask the school?"

"No, that's a dead end. She started cutting classes and not going home since the night of the incident. She's a wanderer now. I called Azaka up and she says she hasn't seen her since the day they met."

"Wait. When did you check that out, Miss Tōko?"

"A little while ago. When Shiki told me last night that Fujino was with Azaka, I called her right away, but it seems she didn't notice anything was out of place with her friend."

The mention of Azaka and Fujino in the café again makes me think in hindsight. Maybe if I had promised to meet Azaka a day later, or if I'd found Keita a day earlier, a meaningless murder might have been avoided.

"That said, Keita Minato's presence here isn't totally useless to us," says Miss Tōko. "We can just use him as bait to lure her out. It might turn violent after that, so I'd advise you to stay here with Keita."

"Wait, what's going on? Why are you so interested in Fujino Asagami anyway? And what do you mean 'violent'? What are the both of you planning?"

Miss Tōko exhales a sharp sigh and replies. "We might have to fight her, if the circumstances dictate it. The truth, Kokutō, is that we have a new job, and the client wants Fujino killed, silently and with no mess. And so our job is to kill her before it all becomes public."

"Wait, hold on a second! It's not like she's killing indiscriminately! She can still be reasoned with," I reply abruptly. Now I finally understand why Miss Tōko took Shiki under her employ. She has use for her talents, and this is it.

"There's one thing you don't know yet, Kokutō, something that makes

that a difficult course of action. Right before I put Keita Minato to sleep, I made him tell me the whole story. The ringleader of their little crew apparently brought a knife that fateful night, and she stabbed Fujino with it deep. Keita said that was the exact moment she made with the twisting. That's when her revenge started."

"But I don't see how that could be reason that she's beyond negotiating with."

"The problem stems from that point, however. Fujino was stabbed on the stomach the night of the 20th."

"Stabbed in the stomach..." I mutter out of hearing of both Shiki and Miss Tōko. Now I connect the dots. The night of the 20th, a student of Reien Girl's Academy, and a stab wound in the stomach. I try my damndest to reach a different conclusion, but it's useless. That's where it all points to.

"According to Keita, she keeps calling him, saying that the pain from the wound is what drives her forward. Any wound that produces that much pain is bound to be obvious. You'd look paler from blood loss, your gait would change from trying to accommodate the pain, things of that nature. But when both Azaka and Shiki met her only two days from the night when she was supposedly stabbed, none of them observed anything out of the ordinary about her. I don't know how but it seems like she's made a full recovery. Here's my theory: every time she remembers being raped, the pain from her stab wound returns. It's just a phantom pain, the wound being long gone, but to her it's every bit as real and painful as that night. And every time she feels the pain, she kills another. Who's to say that won't happen if you happen to be talking to her?"

But at the same time, doesn't that mean that if we can get rid of her phantom pain, then we can talk to her? Before I can say this, however, Shiki offers her own observations.

"You're wrong, Tōko. Her pain is real, and it's still in her body."

"But how could that be? Are you retracting what you said about her being unwounded?"

"Not really. Her stab wound's completely healed, that much we can be sure of. But, fact remains that she's still in pain. Now I'm not saying she's got a rusty metal rebar stuck in her intestines or anything like that. It's just that, to my observation, her pain flares up and disappears on occasion. I saw her when she was in pain, and she was holding her sides like you would if you were stabbed, and that point she's beyond any reasoning. But then I also saw her pain disappear, as if she just completely forgot about it, and at that point she just bores me. I can't enjoy killing her like that, so I just let her go."

"Okay, Shiki, first off, she wouldn't even last a day with a rebar in her intestines." Miss Tōko comments. "A wound that keeps hurting...even after it's completely healed, huh?" she muses, slowly and pensively. She takes out a cigarette, her favored companion when thinking things over hard.

I, too, am puzzled by Shiki's observation of Fujino Asagami. It's natural for a wound to hurt until it heals, but why would a wound that's completely healed suddenly come back from time to time? It's almost like she could dull her nerves and stay the pain, making it linger.

And then I suddenly remember the little trivial detail in Keita Minato's bizarre story, when I asked him what was so weird about her. It isn't an answer to her condition, but anything helps at this point. The recollection comes so suddenly that I shout an "Oh!" unintentionally.

"'O' was always my favorite vowel. It's very well-rounded," says Shiki in response.

"Very funny, Shiki. Actually, I remembered something Keita told me that might be related." Miss Tōko looks at me with an eyebrow cocked, curious now. "He told me that they did all sorts of things to her, including beating her to within an inch of her life, and she wouldn't so much as make a frown. At first, when Keita told me this, I thought that she was just a really strong girl and that she just didn't want to give them the satisfaction of knowing that they angered her. But now I realize that isn't it at all."

"*Oh, yeah right, as if you know her,*" says Shiki sarcastically in a mockery of my voice while looking sharply in my direction. "Sound familiar?"

"Okay, fine, maybe I don't know her, but isn't there a sickness that makes you insensitive to pain? Maybe she could have one of those. I know it's a rare condition, but that would explain all of this."

"It would explain some things," Miss Tōko agrees, "but not all. If she was really insensitive to pain, then the wound wouldn't really hurt. That's not the way Keita described it, though. At any rate, we'd need to investigate it for sure; whether or not it was congenital and things like that. Well, assuming she *is* insensitive to pain, then was there anything that could have changed that? I'm talking about things that mess up your nerves like being whacked hard in the back or getting a large dose of steroids in the neck."

"A hit on the back? Well, I don't really know how hard it was, but Keita told me one of his friends took a metal bat and swung it at her back at one point." I try to restrain my voice to hold back how angry the whole story made me. Miss Tōko emits a strange laugh.

"You know what? That could actually be it. The way you and Keita describe these guys, it's likely they fractured her back bone and that somehow jolted her nervous system back into working condition. Then, with

Fujino still disoriented as to what that new sensation was, they violated her. So her first experience of pain was a confused flavor of blunt force trauma and rape. Knowing this, I'm surprised you even sought shelter for Keita Minato. I'd have left him to die on the spot," Miss Tōko says with a grin. Normally, I'd have opposed her attempts at verbally annoying me, but I'm too worn out in thinking about this bizarre case to offer her any more coherent a counter to it than to hang my head and focus my eyes intently on the floor.

"So, do her back bone and her insensitivity to pain have any relation?" I ask.

"There certainly is. The spinal cord is a conduit for all sensations. Problems that lead to pain insensitivity, such as syringomyelia, usually originate in the spine. Now let me paint a scenario for you. See, there are two types of senses: your superficial sense is what you feel outside, such as touch, pain, and temperature. Deep sensation is pain, pressure, and tension felt inside. Now, can you describe to me what it would be like if you had no sensation whatsoever?"

"I guess it'd be like if you can't feel what you touch and can't taste any food, right?"

Miss Tōko nods her head and smiles, clearly enjoying this exercise. "Exactly the sort of answer someone used to sensation would give. We think that because that just because they still have bodies, that their experience is largely the same as ours, if perhaps less visceral. But that couldn't be farther from the truth. Understand, Kokutō, that to have no sensation is to lack the ability to truly assimilate experience."

I don't really understand. I mean, she can still hold things and talk to people. It's just that when she touches something, it's probably a less visceral experience, right? Why wouldn't she be able to assimilate experience? It's not like she doesn't have a body. I'd think it'd be worse to have a part of your body cut off, in fact.

It's then that I realize it. She doesn't have a body. Or at least, it's something close to it as to be indistinguishable. She feels *nothing*. The only way to prove to herself that she's touching anything is to look at her hands. It's the same as reading a book, lacking the tactile sensation of the characters. Running, for her, is just like moving the point of view in a camera in some movie. She doesn't feel the soil on her feet, or the sharp, sometimes painful, rebounding of force, or the wind on her skin, or the wild pain on your muscles as your heart struggles to pump blood. Only her eyes say that she's running at all. *That's* what having no sensation is like: to be without a body, as if you're ethereal, floating like a ghost; to not feel alive. "Seeing is

believing” is doubly applicable to someone like her.

“That’s...pain insensitivity, huh?” The words almost eave my mouth in a shiver, so shaken am I by the thought.

“Now you’re catching on,” Miss Tōko says, as if she’s been reading my mind. Knowing her, I wouldn’t put it past her. “Now, assuming that Fujino Asagami was temporarily cured of this affliction when she was struck across the back with a metal bat, then that would have been her first experience of pain. Her instinct might have been to lash out. How ironic that her return to sensation transformed her into a killer.”

“To me, the worst thing that Keita and his friends did is that Fujino now equates the pain to living since it’s her first and only sensation so far. So she’s out there, right now, seeking more and more pain because it makes her feel alive. They’ve irreparably damaged her soul,” I say.

Without waiting for Miss Tōko, Shiki offers a disparaging laugh as a retort. “Oh, please, her soul? Can we not go there?”

I admit, in my mind, that perhaps I put it a bit too poetic and sentimental, especially for this crowd. I don’t think I have an answer that can satisfy Shiki, but fortunately Miss Tōko does.

“Come now, Shiki. Surely you’ve heard of those incidents where people die from mental stress. It might be true, it might not be, but if it’s true for the person, then it can be hurt as surely as you can stab a person’s hand.”

Shiki, looking even more sullen than before, folds her arms across her chest. “Oh, so now you’re with Mikiya here on how to handle Fujino Asagami? Is no one hearing me when I say that she is a walking bomb waiting to explode?”

“Keep your hat on, Shiki, I’m still with you on that score.” After saying that, she turns back to me again. “Listen, Kokutō. What I’m thinking is that she’s never come to love or hate anything precisely because she can’t feel anything. I’ve already told you how different she sees the world from us. It might not be wise to apply common sense to her. The unfortunate circumstances of her recovery combined with the abilities it gave her compel us to use haste in this situation. It’s unfortunate, and I understand your hesitation, but that’s what it is.”

That last sentence rung out like a final declaration. “Please don’t talk like that when you haven’t even met her.” Unable to stand being here any longer, I stand up.

“I could say the same to you,” she parries.

“We’re all assuming that her insensitivity to pain was there from birth. What if that isn’t the case?”

“You’re the one that brought it up,” Miss Tōko says, without a hint of

rebuke on her voice. How could she be so indifferent to Fujino Asagami's plight? "Actually, now that I think about it, there could be certain scenarios where Fujino would be the victim. The question is which was first?" I wanted to ask Miss Tōko what she meant by that, but she spoke it in a murmur, so I probably misheard it anyway. "Mmm...I'm not sure. What do you think, Shiki?" asks Miss Tōko to the girl who now has her back turned on the two of us.

"I'll go with whatever you come up with. I don't care either way. I just want to take Fujino out. The thought of her killing another person makes me sick."

"No honor among murderers, huh? I guess your kind really can't tolerate each other."

I decide to be on my way to get a head start on this case. "So I guess I'll follow the paper trail on Fujino Asagami. My own way if I have to. Can I see anything you've got on her?" Miss Tōko hands me her file. I can see that her surname changed from "Asakami" to "Asagami", roughly around the time she entered junior high. Her mother remarried, meaning her father right now isn't her real one. She also lived in Nagano Prefecture during elementary school, before she moved when entering junior high. I guess that's as good a place as any to start. "I'm gonna be gone for some time. I might not be back tomorrow. Is that alright, Miss Tōko?"

"No problem. You're part of the job now after all."

I had one last question to her, one that had been bugging me since Keita told me about it. "Miss Tōko, what Keita said, about Fujino being able to move things with her mind; is that parapsychology stuff true?"

"I'm surprised you're still a doubter at this point when you have me and Shiki right here. One look at that murder scene should tell you that Fujino has powers of some sort. The term parapsychology encompasses a lot of subjects, so if you want to learn more about it, I can point you to the closest thing to an expert." With that, she takes one of her business cards and writes the address of this "expert" on the back.

"So you don't know anything about it?"

"No. We mages study the Art of magic as a discipline, but what she has is a result of the lineage and upbringing of her dynasty, one that has been kept secret from mages, and thus, one that has no field of study or history apart from their own. She's the kind of magic user I hate: one that got her power from a petty dynasty scrapping together what little potential they can muster in their magical lineage, with no training in the responsibilities it implies. Unlike better men, she didn't deserve it." Her last sentence was surely no lie, as it was said with her glasses on, the time where she is least

deceptive.

I take Miss Tōko's business card, and then approach Shiki, who's been whiling away the time by looking outside the window. "Well, see you later, I guess. Don't get reckless while I'm gone."

"You're the one being reckless here. Shame there's no cure for stupidity," she snaps back. She nods, though, and grumbles an "I'll try," almost silently.

With that, I leave the office, relieved a little bit at Shiki's reassurance. She's been quite agitated to go after Fujino Asagami, and I suppose I can understand why. I hope it doesn't come to violence, but if it does, and they fight, I wonder if Shiki will finally realize that she's never liked murder. She and Fujino Asagami are more alike than even the both of them realize.

As for my own safety, well, I'm gonna have to say I've got great odds. I've only tempted death once. Shiki's forgotten all about that incident ever since she woke up from the coma, but it's probably better that she doesn't know. I haven't told her that she's the one that almost killed me.

I probably never will.

I 6

It is the 24th of July, a day after Mikiya Kokutō went out of town to follow the paper trail on Fujino Asagami's past, and it is a day that has so far proven to be, by all estimation, rather uneventful. The only really newsworthy stories for the day are an incoming wallop of a storm predicted to make landfall this evening, and a traffic accident involving a seventeen-year old driving without a license.

Shiki Ryōgi whiles away the lazy morning hours by staring outside the window of Tōko Aozaki's office. Her eyes are fixed on the sky, so blue and cloudless today, with the sun alone being it's only noticeable feature. It seems almost a bad joke that this otherwise stereotypical summer day would soon be disturbed by an invasion of storm clouds. The soundscape is less than idyllic however, as the noise of heavy machinery from the iron factory a few blocks down rings in Shiki's ears without any sign of letting up. She glances at Tōko, somewhat impressed at how she can still conduct the telephone conversation she's in right now without any hint of distraction. With her glasses on, and the receiver in her ear, she spouts a steady stream of words.

"Yes, I'm inquiring about the accident...I see, so the driver had already died before the collision...his head twisted off?...well, with no passengers in the vehicle it does seem like an accident...that's quite alright. Any detective would have a hard time with a *moving* sealed room case, after all...oh, thank you, but that's all I needed to ask. I *must* apologize for bothering you like this detective Akimi. I'll make it up to you somehow."

Tōko on the phone with her glasses on is a show of politeness, a far cry from her usual harsh tones. After hanging up the phone, she adjusts her glasses just a pinch to lie below her eyes, enough to say that they no longer cover them.

"That'd be the seventh now, Shiki. She's definitely taken the lead from the serial killer two years ago." Shiki moves away from the window towards Tōko's desk. A shame. She'd wanted to see the storm clouds gather in the sky.

"Can't say I didn't warn you," Shiki states bluntly. "Now she's killing people that she doesn't even know."

"Seems that way. This 'Shōichi Takaki' fellow", she says—the name of Fujino's latest victim—"seems unconnected to Keita Minato as well. This is a murder unrelated to her so-called revenge."

Shiki grinds her teeth in impatience. She grabs her red leather jacket and

dons it over her white kimono in a single, rough motion. “If that’s the case, then I’m sure as hell not sitting around here. Any ideas where I can start looking for her, Tōko?”

“No clue. I can figure two, maybe three areas where she could be hiding. If you’re going to try and find her, you’re just going to have to hit all of them.” She produces three small cards from her desk drawer and tosses them to Shiki, who catches them out of the air. Shiki gives them a quick once-over.

“ID cards from Asagami Construction? Who’s this ‘Sōren Alaya’ character?” The cards each have a magstripe on them, indicating they’re used for identification.

“Those’ll get you into the construction sites that Asagami Construction currently have their hands in. The name’s from a long gone friend, since I couldn’t think up a random name at the time I had those made, but never mind that. Fujino Asagami must be hiding in a place she thinks is secure, and there’s nothing more secure than the family business. She’s got cards like that too, I imagine, to sneak into the places at night. If she’s hiding anywhere, it’s probably going to be in those places. This is going to mean trouble, so if you’re going to do it, do it before Kokutō comes back.”

Shiki glares at Tōko, her normally empty eyes now giving the mage a piercing look. It is a wordless objection at the last advice she chose to impart, but in the end Shiki turns around to leave. She’ll follow Tōko’s lead on this one, even if that means leaving Mikiya in the dark. Shiki leaves the office in no particular hurry, the gentle clacking echo of her boots audible even after she walks out of the door. As the little footsteps fade, it is now Tōko’s turn to look out the window.

“Kokutō’s too late on this one, huh?” the mage murmurs to herself. “Two storms out there tonight, and I don’t know which of them will come and which of them will break first. *Shiki* might not last the night alone, Ryōgi.”

I 7

Past noon, the weather starts to take a turn for the worse when dull, ash-colored clouds slowly begin to creep along the sky. The wind is picking up as well, and the people on the streets quicken their paces, all of them seem to be talking about a coming storm. While I walk, burning pain shoots through my abdomen even as I clutch it tighter. Preoccupied as I was with my hunt for Keita Minato's friends, I heard no news about the storm. It will make it difficult to search, so I decide to call it off for tonight. I spend the last, fleeting hours of the afternoon making my way across town to the port, and I see the city slowly lower its tempo over the hours, and the volume of people steadily decrease.

Though it is only 7:00 in the evening in summertime, the sky had long since become dark. Even the seasons grow mad at the coming of the storm. My body shares the sentiment, as it continues to become sluggish and my reactions become slower with each passing day. With effort, I finally arrive at the Broad Bridge, Father's pet project, which bridges this coast and the one across the bay. With four lanes on either side and passages and walkways for people underneath, it is quite the structure. The "basement" is a shopping mall. The main entryway into the bridge is guarded, but I know the same isn't true for the shopping mall entrance. Having made my way there, I take one of the cards that I stole from the manor, and swipe it through the receiver.

The door opens welcomingly to a dark passageway. The structure and the interior design of the mall had already been finished, but the lights were yet to be connected, making the entire thing look like a subway station about to close up for the day. The lack of light made the mall promenade stretch onward for what seemed like an interminable distance, with shops of various products flanking it. After walking about five hundred meters, however, the surroundings abruptly change, indicating that I had reached the parking lot. The wall that divided it and the mall was unfinished, so I didn't notice it. As a matter of fact, the entire parking lot was still under construction. The iron rebars on the walls, exposed as they are like a person's bones, make the entire structure look fragile. Some of the wall sections are, as yet, unbuilt, making the room exposed to the outside if not for the simple tarpaulin covering the breaches.

It's been an hour since I entered the bridge interior, and the storm is already raging. The howling wind is especially audible here in the parking lot, where the violent flapping of the canvas, the roar of the waves, and

the pitter-patter of the raindrops like machine gun fire combine to make a cacophony I can barely endure. It was raining that day too, on the night of my first murder. I let the warm raindrops wash over me and watched as the dirt, the grime, and the slick blood trickled from my hands. And then I met him, the man who I had last met in junior high, who had shared with me only a single conversation.

No other memory do I treasure more than the day I first met him, when the horizon looked almost ablaze in the sunset. A cross-school event had only just finished, and I was still in the school playing field because of a sprained ankle. Not being able to feel pain, I could try to move, but I saw how swollen my ankle already was, and if I tried to push it any further, I knew it would get to the point where I would damage it beyond recovery. And I didn't want to call out for help, either, because they would all ask me the same questions, asking me about the pain I didn't feel, like I'm some sort of attraction. So I just sat there, alone, staring at the setting sun with a vaguely disinterested expression on my face, praying that no one would notice. No one should ever notice. Not mother, not father, not my teachers, not my friends, no one. I need to be the Fujino that they wanted, the Fujino that was normal.

Somebody tapped me on the shoulder. I never felt it, but I heard his hand land close to my ear. I turned around and there he stood; an upperclassman from another school. His unassuming eyes are of someone refreshingly ignorant of my condition, and yet, on that first time I met him, I think I must have hated him for bothering me.

"Does it hurt?" he said, and I dreaded what would come next. The curiosity. The prying. The false praise that implied fear and disbelief. I shook my head no. He glanced at the name tag on my PE uniform, examined my sprained ankle briefly, and then finally frowned at me. I knew that he was going to ask something I didn't like next, so I just closed my eyes, determined to just ignore the thoughtless questions that were going to come from someone normal. I didn't want to hear them. But instead, he said something altogether different.

"Not too bright, are we? Listen, you're not supposed to hold the pain inside, but show it outside. That way, people can help you, little Fujino."

He carried me to the nurse's office without so much as a complaint, and there we parted ways. I might have fallen for him then, for how he worried about me and my suffering like no one else did. It's a memory that seems more and more like a faint dream with each throb of the pain. The same pain that now brings me back to reality, and dispels the thought from my mind like melting ice. It almost feels as if I'm not...worthy to even remem-

ber it, sullied as my hands are in the blood of many people. But the rain has helped me before, like holy water absolving me of sin, and there is no better rain than the one this huge storm brings.

I drag my slowing body to the parking lot ramp leading to the upper portion of the bridge, yearning for the sweet sensation of the summer rain on my skin.

Lingering Rain - VI

The rain has made shallow puddles form on the four lane asphalt road of the bridge, many of them ankle deep. The raindrops fall in harsh angles with no sign of respite, and the wind howls so fiercely, it almost seems able to topple the street lamps like weak trees. The sky above and the sea below are both fields of total blackness; the lights from the port and the city already so far off and unreachable as to seem like looking at the moon.

A figure can be seen walking in the distance. The black uniform she is wearing gives her the appearance of a raven, blending into the night and barely visible. Her purple lips breathe heavily with each step she takes. When she steps into the light of a street lamp, she comes upon a phantom some distance from her, who now speaks.

"I finally found you, Asagami." In the midst of the storm's chaos, the phantom stands, almost ethereal in her white kimono. The red jacket worn over it, flapping in the wind, looks more like a scarf of blood from a distance. Under the light of the lampposts, they look at each other.

"Shiki...Ryōgi," says the raven.

"I told you, you should have gone home like a good little girl. But you've tasted blood and found a liking to it. All the killing, all the murder, you're enjoying it, aren't you?"

Though separated by ten meters, and dampened by the noise of the wind, their voices carry towards each other clearly.

"Are you not describing yourself?" accuses the raven. "I find no pleasure at all in what I have to do." Breathing heavily, the raven affixes her gaze on the phantom, then covers her face with her left hand, the eyes peering out between the fingers shining with hostility and murder. In answer, the phantom readies herself, knife on her right hand.

"Like they say in this country, 'third time's the charm.'" The phantom makes a bored laugh. The raven will certainly do for tonight. "Ah, how alive I feel now. We're murderers you and I, birds of a feather. Just stay the way you are now, and this'll be quick."

And with those words, the phantom and raven both move towards each other, whatever chains holding them back now released.

In a sudden burst of speed, Shiki starts to sprint towards Fujino, her pace seemingly unhindered by the wet asphalt and the rain. Only three seconds to close the distance with Fujino, enough time to force her fragile body to the ground and drive a knife through her heart. But Fujino need only look at her target, and on this score, she has the advantage. The three seconds prove to be decisive.

A faint light glitters in Fujino's eyes. She focuses on Shiki's left leg as the axis of rotation, and in only a moment, the spell starts to manifest. In that same instant, Shiki feels the pull of the unseen hand on her leg, and with an explosion of force, jumps quickly to one side, making water splash in the opposite direction. But if the spell slackened due to that, it was not to any reasonable amount. This spell was no projectile. As long as Shiki remained within sight of Fujino, she couldn't escape it.

I may have underestimated her, goddamit, thinks Shiki. She runs again, and in an attempt to escape Fujino's line of sight, her path describes a circle around the girl in black.

"Don't even think you can esc—" Fujino starts to say, but is cut off when she sees Shiki take her run all the way to the bridge's guardrail and leaps forth and downward. A second or two later, Fujino hears the sound of window glass breaking: the roof of the parking lot, right below the bridge. "How reckless of her," murmur the purple, smiling lips. While she had slipped away for now, Fujino had kept her vision on Shiki's left hand, and she could swear that she saw Shiki's jacket sleeve twist. If she was right, she had destroyed her arm.

"I...am the stronger one," Fujino says, even as the pain in her stomach too grows stronger with her proclamation. Taking the ramp and descending back to the parking lot once again, she attempts to hold back the pain. Her score with Shiki Ryōgi must be settled here, tonight.

To Fujino, the parking lot seems darker than before. Her eyes are still adjusting to the extreme darkness, and it makes navigating her way more difficult than she had expected. Construction materials are also stacked and scattered haphazardly all over the place, and one or two times Fujino almost slipped and lost footing trying to make her way through the convoluted mess. Though only a scant few minutes since their first encounter, Fujino has failed to find any trace of Shiki. Already, she regrets her decision to follow Shiki down here, as all the obstacles make for good cover and concealment for the knife wielding woman. Even if Fujino knew where Shiki is hiding, as long as she couldn't actually see her, Fujino's spell would

only hit what Shiki was hiding behind.

In that brief clash on the bridge, Shiki had already read Fujino's spell, and withdrew to a place where she could have a fighting chance. It makes Fujino realize how disadvantaged she is in fighting. *Even so, I am the stronger one*, she thinks. *If I can't see her, then I'll strip this place bare.* Randomly, Fujino starts to destroy anything that might offer cover. Support pillars, stacks of iron poles, guardrails, wall partitions—with each twist and crack of concrete, Fujino's pain throbs faster, and the tremors in the building grow stronger.

"Okay, now you've officially lost it," resounds a voice in the shadows. Fujino turns toward it, the sound seeming to come from behind a pile of construction materials. She destroys it in a blink of an eye, only to see Shiki dart out of it to the side. Wasting no time, she rushes towards Fujino.

"I have you!" Fujino exclaims, and sets her sights on the phantom clad in white. Shiki continues her charge, her bloodied and battered left arm outstretched.

There is a moment's hesitation from Fujino, and then she works her spell. With a sickening crunch of ripped sinew and bone, she bends Shiki's already wounded arm, and finally breaks it. But when Fujino casts her eyes on Shiki's neck to finish the job, she finds that the girl is but one solid pace from her.

Shiki's knife catches light for an instant and glints. She thrusts straight towards Fujino's carotid artery in a graceful, merciless path, the glint on the blade seeming to leave a silvery thread as the cold steel travels through the darkness.

But Fujino saw Shiki smiling malevolently, even while her arm had already been viciously destroyed. Terrified at the sight of it, Fujino had moved long before Shiki's thrust had even started, and she was already ducking under the knife when it neared her.

Clicking her tongue at her miscalculation, Shiki recovers from her missed attack, readies her knife for another strike, and starts to spring towards the offensive again, but not before Fujino recovers from her daze and weaves her spell at Shiki's torso.

"GO AWAY!" yells Fujino, unleashing her attack at the same time. Shiki, for her part, decides that she missed her chance and evades the point-blank blast by a hair's breadth. It only takes her a leap and a moment's sprint to recede back into the shadows that concealed her well only seconds ago. A good opponent: she knows when to retreat. "Is she crazy?" murmurs Fujino between deep, ragged breaths; for once not borne from her stomach pain, but from the rush of adrenalin and the nervousness

starting to set in. Her vision darts from shadow to shadow, scanning them for movement. She never saw where Shiki chose to hide, and she has no idea when and where she'll choose to strike from again.

Fujino feels the nape of her neck, where Shiki had almost hit her. As it turns out, the knife had nicked her flesh there a little, a wound making itself known when Fujino lightly brushes a finger over it. *I destroyed her arm, but why didn't she stop?* She keeps replaying the moment in her head: how she crushed Shiki's arm and she kept on coming, her eyes, her sadistic grin. Shiki was enjoying this. *I'm panicking, even though I sent her running, and yet she enjoys herself! It almost seemed as if she was actually happy that I destroyed her arm.*

I've not enjoyed a single one of my murders, but she's different. All the fighting, all the murder, it must be like a drug to her, and the more extreme it is, the more enjoyment she gets out of it.

And yet, Fujino tries to dispel from her memory how sweet she thought the fragrance of blood was on her first murder, how soft the touch of blood on her hands were, and how they gave rise to a feeling beyond words that gripped her heart. The pain that she felt seemed like life to her, and it only seemed logical for her to discover herself in the pain of others. Though it is a sensation she has tried to escape since that accursed night, she finds that the pain of others stimulates her, as it makes her imagine the pain they go through. There is no better thing that makes Fujino feel alive than this fascination and feeling of control. But these are thoughts she dare not entertain and tries her hardest to deny.

If, like me, Shiki feels disconnected from her own life, then what does she do to compensate for that disconnection?

"Ah, fuck, that did not go too well," utters Shiki to herself, out of sight behind a pile of debris that was once a wall, courtesy of Fujino's crude method of searching earlier. The left arm that Fujino had twisted was long dead. Shiki had thought that since it was just a pile of useless flesh anyway, that she'd use it as a shield and bet it all on one decisive attack, but Fujino accidentally gained a new lease on life thanks to her unexpected cowardice.

Shiki takes off her jacket and uses her knife to cut off a sleeve. With some creative application of her mouth and remaining arm, she wraps the sleeve around her left upper arm, fashioning a crude dressing to stem the bleeding. She can't feel anything from it anymore, and the thought that she might never be able to move it again gives her a momentary chill, but also

a strangely gratifying sensation. *Keep it up Asagami! You've been handling this fight like a pro so far, thinks Shiki. Then again, that sensation just might be her consciousness slipping due to rapid blood loss. Well, Mikiya always said I was as stubborn as a mule. At the very least, it'll clear my head some.*

This fight with Fujino is exactly the kind of experience Shiki signed up for, a battle where one slight misstep can mean curtains for both of them. The excitement Shiki draws from the tension of mortal combat is like a drug. And to Shiki, who constantly feels imprisoned in her own unreliable memory, this is the only thing that can affirm the small spark of life still left in her, and allow her to declare it as her own. Base and primal perhaps, but it gets the job done. If Fujino Asagami seeks pleasure in murder, as Shiki thinks, then Shiki uses it to feel alive again.

Shiki listens to the echo of Fujino inhaling, then exhaling...a pause, and then it repeats—strained, deep breaths that betray her pain and her trepidation. Though Fujino is yet to be injured, her breathing is as labored as Shiki's. In the darkness, the cycle repeats itself, creating a sort of metronomic rhythm: they inhale and exhale at the same pace, their hearts simultaneously pump blood in their adrenaline-fueled bodies, and their thoughts are mutually focused on each other, twins on the swaying cradle of the Broad Bridge, rocked and buffeted by the storm. And for the first time, Shiki feels some semblance of affection towards Fujino, so much so that she feels the need to wring the life out of Fujino with her own hands.

Even though I know there's no need for me to, Shiki thinks. She's known since meeting her in the café that she was already damaged goods, and quite close to dying outright. There was no real need for her to come here and fight her. But that's how humans live. Shiki thinks back to what Tōko said some time ago, that humans are creatures who give meaning to meaningless actions, and derive purpose from it.

And like this situation, some people would scorn it as meaningless, while others would derive purpose from it. Where does one begin and another end? You establish your own boundary while the consensus of others ultimately determines it. The world is full of such empty boundaries. *That's why the ones who get to decide where the edge lies are the ones who toe the line: like me, or Mikiya, or even Fujino. We aren't so far from each other, Fujino and me. But this place isn't big enough for both of us psychos.*

"Another dance, then," Shiki whispers again. "But this time, with my Eyes seeing the strings in your special effects magic." Shaking her head to bring back some bit of the consciousness she's already lost with the blood, Shiki stands up. Her right hand holds the knife with a firm grip.

If Fujino won't back off herself, then Shiki will just have to eliminate her.

Shiki reveals herself to Fujino, emerging from behind her cover a stone's throw away. Given that her body temperature is already over 39°C, Fujino can't be blamed for not thinking that her condition isn't giving her any hallucinations. She blinks once, just to confirm that what she's seeing is real.

"You're insane to come out of hiding like that," Fujino says. She wastes no time, immediately focusing her will on working the spell. Her vision begins to distort. She wills one axis of rotation each for Shiki's head and legs, and bends. Like cheap cloth, Shiki's body is torn apart into so many bits and pieces.

Or at least, it was supposed to be.

Before any such damage could be dealt, Shiki raises her right arm, and with a single slash, excises Fujino's "distortion." The points of rotation Fujino had created are warded away by the knife, dying as easily as any living being.

"Things without form are difficult to see," Shiki begins to say. "But thanks to you firing that spell all over the place too much, I can finally see it. Your spell's nimbus is a spiral of green and red. Really quite beautiful, if I do say so myself." Fujino has no idea what she's saying. The only thing she knows right now is the primal instinct of prey: if she can't stop Shiki, she'll kill her.

In her mind, Fujino repeatedly utters her pathetic curse, trying to will it into reality.

Bend! Bend! Bend! Bend!

With each repetition, a new manifestation of the spell appears in the air in front of Shiki, but she dispels it each time with a swing of her knife, and each time the pain in Fujino's stomach is pushed further and further to its limit.

"What...are you?" Fujino and Shiki lock eyes. Fujino sees only a deep emptiness, and Shiki sees only fear.

"There's a flaw for everything in the world," says Shiki. "Air, intent, and even time. Humans need not even be said. If there's a beginning for everything, then there's also an end. My Eyes see that end, the death of everything. And once I see that death, all anything needs is a single, light push, that sends it barreling off into entropy. Magic, just like yours." With those sinister Eyes, Shiki glares at Fujino. "That's why, if there really was a God, he would fall just as easily against me."

And with that, Shiki runs at Fujino, every footfall barely touching the ground; an ease of movement that belied her injured state. As Shiki approaches, she tackles Fujino and, sitting on top of Fujino with both legs

straddling her body, she pins her to the ground. With her executioner now so close to her, Fujino's throat trembles.

"Are you...going to kill me?" Fujino asks, her mouth quivering. Shiki does not offer a response. "Why are you going to kill me? I've only killed because I was in pain." At this, Shiki laughs.

"Still in denial? Then riddle me this: why are you doing that same smile you did back when we last met? Even now, you look like you're enjoying yourself. Why is that?"

"That's impossible." Fujino almost hesitates to say it. Slowly, she places a hand on her cold lips. Without a doubt, it's bent into the rictus of a smile. She tries to remember what her face looked like in the puddles of blood borne from her murders. Did they, too, reflect a smiling face? *I always felt something every time I committed murder. Was it happiness like Shiki says? Even when I was violated, I felt no pain, so did I turn to murder to pleasure myself?*

"In the end, this is all so much fun to you. You can't help but be attracted to causing pain, and that's why you'll never stop suffering. You'd keep killing without a reason except for yourself."

"That's...the answer?" murmurs Fujino. She can't accept it. She doesn't even want to think about it. I'm different from you, she keeps repeating in her mind. But Shiki's reply destroys everything.

"Hell, I should know. I said it before, didn't I? We're similar, birds of a feather."

Shiki raises her knife, and Fujino cries out one last, desperate call: a scream, as hard and as strained as she can perform at the top of her lungs, for one last pathetic curse.

"BEND!"

And as if in response, the parking lot building trembles with the force of an earthquake. In the moment before Shiki's knife falls, Fujino's mind wanders to the outside, to the raging storm, and the violent waves in the bay. Resisting the burning sensation her fever has in her mind, she envisions both ends of the bridge, like a view from on high. One axis of rotation for either end—

And then they bend.

A tremor resounds, like scores of thunder all happening at the same time. The walls and the iron bars inside them groan and scream, while the ground itself cracks and tilts in upheaval. Similar cracks slowly snake their way across the ceiling, with little pebbles falling away from it. Though the

entire structure is collapsing in on itself, Fujino can only stare. Shiki had been on top of Fujino until a moment ago, when she inadvertently slipped when the floor gave way, as if the ground itself swallowed her up. If Fujino didn't move now, the same thing might happen to her. She knew, though, that with the athletic ability Shiki had so far demonstrated, it is likely she survived. It would only be a matter of time before she returned to the chase.

Outside is the storm, and below her, the bay. Though burning with fever and burdened with a body that seems adamant to refuse her mind's commands, Fujino manages to will herself to stand up. Slowly, she begins to walk, extricating herself from the parking lot towards the shopping mall, which has so far sustained little damage. Still, the once rectangular promenade is now bent in places.

It only takes her a few steps before collapsing face-down on the floor. It's taking her an enormous effort to even breathe, let alone move her legs. Her head is in a daze, and her sight is failing her. The only thing she feels right now is the one thing that has been her constant travelling companion: the violent pain inside her body. *I'm going to die*, thinks Fujino for the first time in her life. *It hurts so much, I can't take it anymore. If living on means enduring this searing ache, then perhaps it's better to just die.*

Stunned and lying prone on the ground, Fujino coughs, and this time, blood comes with it. With her quickly fading vision, only the slow spread of the blood she's vomiting is clearly visible. Red blood, like the blood red memory of a time long past: the burning horizon etched in her mind, forever lighted by the setting sun.

"No, I don't...want to die," she whispers weakly, fighting her earlier thoughts while reaching an arm out in front of her. If her legs won't cooperate, then her arms will just have to do. She makes slow progress crawling on the ground, inch by bloody inch, but she is driven forward by her fear of death, and its white phantom harbinger. The only sensation that Fujino can feel now is the lingering pain.

It hurts.

It hurts.

It hurts.

That simple declaration is the only thing Fujino can bring to mind. Now that she has finally gained a sense of pain, ironically, she has grown to detest it. The pain feels like a hundred different needles all in her stomach, but Fujino can't allow herself to die now. Not now, when she has done nothing, but so much more is left to do. *Too pathetic, too empty, too miserable.*

The needles bury themselves deeper, burning her stomach like an acid. She's losing more ground to it every second, clawing at life madly, searching for something that can make it easier.

It hurts.

It hurts.

It hurts.

It hurts.

It hurts.

My life, my words, my memories; I want all of them to linger on like the pain of a scar.

The words echo in her mind, echoing the pulse of the pain. It's the same pain as the one she used to make the other people suffer, the realization of which is the most painful thing of all. The weight of the blood she has spilled presses so heavily in her mind that she cannot even bring herself to an empty apology. Her body convulses, and the blood in her throat is the sign of the last gasp of pain. When she vomits the blood, her vision, and what little light she sees, starts to sink into darkness. Her mind only brings her back to that rain-soaked night, when he met him again, and he asked her if her stomach hurt. To that memory of him, she speaks the desire she has kept for so long, a thing she wished she could have said much earlier.

"It hurts—so much...so much that I could cry."

And to the memory of her dear mother, she asks a final question.

"Mother, is it all right for little Fujino to cry?"

Alone and in sorrow, all Fujino can do is cry, but somehow, doing that eases the pain. He was right. You're not supposed to hold the pain inside, but show it outside. *I'm glad I met him again, so he couldn't see me like this.*

"It hurts, doesn't it?" someone says to Fujino, barely audible at the edge of her consciousness. Almost blind, Fujino can only just make out Shiki standing next to her, knife still in hand. "If it hurts, then you should have said so earlier." The words ring out like a farewell. *Yes, that's what he would have said too. If I could have only said it on that day three years ago, if I just let everything out, what could have happened? What path would I have taken? I can't even imagine a better life now. I've committed so many sins, taken so many lives, all for the sake of my own pleasure, that I can't bring one to mind.*

Fujino stops her breathing, and in those last few seconds, the pain finally fades. She never feels the knife swooping downwards, piercing her chest.

Lingering Rain - VII

The storm is just hitting the height of its ferocity when I get back into town. Braving the rain, I immediately make my way to the office, and when I enter, Miss Tōko greets me by accidentally letting the cigarette in her mouth fall off because of her surprised look.

"Well, that sure was fast. It's only been a day," she remarks.

"As soon as I heard there was a storm coming, I came back before they stopped public transportation."

"I...see," Miss Tōko says with apprehension. Her eyebrows are scrunched up in a look of consternation. Did something happen? Before that, however, there are more pressing concerns she needs to know about.

"Ma'am, I've checked back on stuff about Fujino Asagami, and found out that her pain insensitivity is acquired, not congenital. She was normal until she was six years old."

"Wait a minute, that can't be right. Look, if she wasn't born with the damn condition, then it has to be something like syringomyelia, but that causes you to have physical complications, which Fujino doesn't have. A rare case like hers where only the pain sensitivity is gone can't be anything but congenital."

"I know. Her doctor said the same thing. Let me explain a few things," I reply. It would be nice to tell her the whole story I learned from going to Nagano, but since we don't have time I'll just have to go over the more important parts, when Fujino was still a part of the Asakami family.

"The Asakami family, Fujino's original family, was a well-known dynasty in Nagano, but they fell into bankruptcy around when Fujino was twelve years old. Fujino's mother then remarried into the Asagami family, a distant branch of the Asakami's. The Asagami's, for their part, only wanted the Asakami land, and shouldered the debt only for that purpose. In her childhood days, Fujino was still sensitive to pain, but the people I talked to said she also had a strange power. She could make things bend without touching them."

Miss Tōko lights up a cigarette and inhales a long one. She sits down behind her desk before waving the cigarette at me, motioning me to continue.

"She was treated like a demon child, and was shunned and even abused by most of the other kids, verbally and physically. But when she was around six, the power went out of her for some reason, along with her sense of pain." Miss Tōko narrows her eyes in interest, and I see the subtle begin-

nings of a smile playing at the tips of her mouth. “I found out that the Asakamis hired a personal doctor for Fujino around that time too, but no one could tell me who he was, and the Asakami manor was unoccupied and abandoned, so I couldn’t ask there.”

“Wait, are we done? Don’t tell me that’s all the dirt you got?”

“Patience is a virtue, ma’am, so let me finish. I followed up on some police and local government records and found him pretty easily. The doctor was a guy named Akita. He’s an unlicensed doctor, which I guess is just how the Asakami’s preferred it. Took me the better part of a day to pry a story out of him.”

“See, now you might *really* get paid this month. When I eventually fire you, Kokutō, you might want to consider being a detective. I’d even hire you from time to time.”

“Gee, thanks,” I reply in sarcastic monotone, and then continue the story. “Seems this doctor was more like a pharmacist, since he only sold medicine. Asprins, indomethacin, steroids, stuff like that. He didn’t know how Fujino became pain insensitive either, because apparently the father did it himself.”

“Wait, what do you mean? That Fujino’s father cured her by himself, or administered the medicine by himself?” A subtle difference, one I recognize by nodding my head.

“The latter, of course. The father apparently had no intention of curing Fujino of her pain insensitivity, but the doctor diagnosed her all the same. He said the possibility of her having something called ‘neuromyelitis optica’ was high.”

“Neuromyelitis optica...Devic’s disease, huh?”

“I’m sorry ma’am, but you’re going to have to enlighten me on this one.”

“It’s a type of myelitis, and another disease where your senses slowly go numb, apart from weakening your legs and a gradual degradation of eyesight, all the way until you’re blind. They usually give you steroids early on to treat it, and indomethacin to lessen the pain.” Miss Tōko giggles lightly, the same kind of laugh she always does when she comes up with a solution to a difficult problem. It’s always a bit scary, kind of like the professor I talked to yesterday. “Now I see. Yeah, no wonder she became like that. Hers isn’t congenital or acquired, but something artificial. She was made to lose her sense of pain. I see what that family tried to do now. Exactly the opposite of what the Ryōgi dynasty does.”

I try to brace myself for the wave of half-monologue, half-dialogue that she is inevitably entering, and ask for more clarification. “So what exactly is this ‘indomethacin’ stuff?”

"A drug for pain relief. See, whatever kind of wound you get, you get pain, and it's a reaction to outside influences that are impeding you. Your body produces some chemicals that stimulate some nerves that send a signal to your brain saying 'Oh my God, I am going to die,' and that's how you get pain. Aspirins and indomethacin work by controlling your prostaglandin production, and in turn your arachidonic acid, which sensitizes your neurons to pain. A large enough dose of indomethacin can basically take away your pain."

Miss Tōko says all of this in almost one breath, and her face has that rare look of enjoyment that she finally has an opportunity to explain all of this. Honestly, though, these "arachidons" and stuff all sound like dinosaur names, and it's really all Greek to me. "So in other words, it's medicine that numbs you to pain, right?"

"Well, not *exactly*," she replies. "Opioids would probably be much better. Stuff works like endorphins in your brain: gets you right up, and makes your central nervous system work smooth as butter, but—" I glare at her sharply to indicate that she should probably hold back on explaining more medical terms. "Oh...well, we'll leave that subject alone for now, I guess. Point is, Fujino's father knew that her power was tied to her sense of pain, and he wanted to block it I suppose, but Fujino's capability for sensation had to go with it. That's why the father made Fujino OD on painkillers. Quite unlike the Ryōgi dynasty, who until this day still perform tireless rituals to get heirs close to magical potential. Sadly, the only result is that Fujino's power wasn't snuffed out, only suppressed for a time, and now it's coming back in a big way. Kind of like when the mages around northern Africa sew their eyes shut, the paradigm being that it prevents mana from 'leaking out', except with Fujino it's possibly less disturbing."

Surprisingly enough, I recognize some of what Miss Tōko is saying. The same dubious rumors circulated when I was in Nagano: of the old Asakami family occasionally producing children who, like the professor put it, played an entirely different card game. These children, born with supernatural capabilities, were shunned. So they finally resorted to medicines to artificially dull the pain, and the powers.

"The worst part is how she can never go back to normal," I respond. "Whether she's taking the medicine and loses her power, or not taking them and getting the powers back. The professor you referred me to called her a 'living paradox', because she doesn't have the necessary subconscious ability to assimilate experience like others do, like you said, and so she can't sympathize with anybody. If only she was still pain insensitive at on that night, then just maybe she wouldn't have started to kill."

"Come now, let's not denigrate pain," Miss Tōko says, cutting me off. "You blame one thing, you make sure it's the wound. No matter how much it hurts, we need pain. Do you think you pull your hand out of the fire because it's on fire? No, you pull it out because it's hot and it hurts. If we didn't have pain, we wouldn't pull our hands out until it's a smoldering stump. Just look at Fujino Asagami, who, as soon as her sense of pain returned from being struck in the back, proceeded immediately to defend herself. For the first time, she recognized those people were dangerous, and were hurting her. Still, killing them might have been going a bit too far."

"Ma'am, my question from the last time we met still stands. Isn't there anything we can do to help her? Can't she be cured?"

"A wound you can't cure only means death. Unfortunately, I think that's the case we're dealing with now."

Sometimes I really have no idea how Miss Tōko can say things like that. She just put a human life on the spot, and here I am thinking she can still be saved, if only we understood the nature of her pain, if only we—

"Kokutō, I'm going to say it once more, with feeling. Hers is the kind of pain that can no longer be healed. Well, it'd be more accurate to say that she wasn't wounded from the start."

"Wait, I'm...not sure I know what you mean."

"Tear your mind away from trying to be the good guy for a second and think about the wound itself. When was the last time you heard a deep stab wound fix itself up in two days?"

"Well, sure that's true, but..." Wait. If what she's saying is true, then haven't we been operating from a mistaken perspective all this time? I must have the most puzzled look on my face since Miss Tōko is covering her mouth with a hand, barely holding back her laughter.

"While I applaud you for researching Fujino Asagami's past, you neglected looking up what she's been up to in the present. She's been seeing a doctor in the city for a month or two now, but she's neglected to show up in the past twenty days."

"Whoa, wait a minute. A doctor, here in Tokyo?!"

Miss Tōko cocks an eyebrow in surprise. "Kokutō, you're good in investigation and following a lead, but you miss out on some of the most obvious things. The thing that people insensitive to pain are most scared about is something wrong going on in their bodies. Lacking pain, they don't have the benefit of an early warning system on most of the weird hijinks a body can get into, so they go visit a doctor, much more often than an average person, just so they can get a look-see."

I have to admit that I missed that one, so driven was I to find out any-

thing in Fujino's past that might tell me something about her motivations. Fujino acting in secret means that, at the very least, Fujino's parents don't know what Fujino has become now.

"To bring us back to Fujino and the mystery of her wound," Miss Tōko begins again. "Fujino killing her abusers was the result of a simple misunderstanding, Kokutō. Those boys forced Fujino down, and their leader brought out a knife. Fujino thought she was going to get stabbed—and she really was going to!—but she had already recovered her sense of pain at that point, and she probably unconsciously used her power. Between the stab and the twisting, Fujino's was faster. What I'm seeing is that she twisted the head off of that guy like a fucking screw, and the blood spatter struck Fujino, making her think she was stabbed."

I shake my head, trying to rid my mind of the visceral images Miss Tōko's story is conjuring up. "There's something wrong with that story. If Fujino's sense of pain had returned, then she wouldn't make that misunderstanding. There wouldn't be any pain if she wasn't really stabbed."

"Fujino was in pain from the start, really," Miss Tōko immediately replies. "I made the doctor that Fujino saw recently show me her clinical records. She's has chronic caecitis, more commonly known as appendicitis. The pain in her abdomen isn't from a knife, but from inside her body. If her sense of pain returned right before she was stabbed, the pain in her stomach told her mind that she was already stabbed. It must have happened so fast, Fujino was confused. Having been raised for most of her life not knowing pain, she didn't even check to see if she actually was stabbed, because she didn't have the experience of hurting real bad before, and the steps that people normally take in those situations. She'd look at her stomach and interpret the lack of a wound as a sign that it was already healed."

"So it's all just one big misunderstanding?"

"The wound itself is. But it doesn't change the facts: Fujino's been pushed over the edge. Ignoring whether or not she was even stabbed, the fact that the leader had brought a knife that night meant that he was serious about killing Fujino. The only way she could have escaped that bar was to kill them. Unfortunately for Fujino, Keita Minato escaped. If everything was settled on that night, she might not have gone this far." Miss Tōko snuffs out the cigarette she's smoking and reaches into her pack for a fresh one. "Like Shiki said, she's beyond help now."

"Both of you keep saying that, but why is she?" I say, anger rising in my voice.

"Shiki was probably talking about the mental side of things. Fujino's quest for revenge against the five people who violated her is, while mur-

der, still somewhat justifiable. She crossed the line when she started killing people unrelated to that incident. It's the lack of any sense or reason behind it that truly made Shiki after Fujino's blood. Despite having a taste for murder, I think Shiki still understands the weight of death, and the toll murder takes on someone. Notice how she doesn't just slaughter people on the street willy-nilly. Fujino indulged her more primal passions, and Shiki can't forgive her for that."

Is Fujino really indulging, I wonder, or is she just running away? Miss Tōko continues:

"That's Shiki's reasoning, but I'm talking how she's 'beyond help' physically. Appendicitis, when left alone, can rupture your appendix and cause peritonitis. The inflammation results in extreme pain, probably comparable to being stabbed with a knife. Then you start getting fevers, cyanosis, shock from low blood pressure, all that good stuff. When it reaches the duodenum, you can die in half a day. It's already been five days since the night of the 20th, and the appendix should long have ruptured now. Sad, but it's terminal—she's gonna bite it." She says it clinically, with all the weight and delicacy of someone reporting on a science class. I'll never be able to understand how she does that.

"Maybe if we hurry, we can still find her and—"

"Kokutō, the client for this job is Fujino Asagami's father. The patriarch of the Asagami family told me himself. They can't risk a scandal like this leaking out to the public, not with their well cultivated business reputation on the line. The father must've known the family secret, and recognized the true nature of the incident on the bar as Fujino's doing. He hired us to take her out, a 'monster' by his own words. Strange, isn't it? The father is supposed to shelter their daughter. But now he's the one taking a check out of his wallet to let us kill her. The world really is against her." She concludes with a long, exasperated sigh. "We finish this job *tonight*. Shiki already left."

Unbelievable. I tried to stop this, but now it's actually happening.

"Son of a bitch," I utter inadvertently. Whether it is directed to myself, Miss Tōko, Shiki, Fujino's father, or Fujino herself, even I don't know.

Lingering Rain - VIII

I eventually convince Miss Tōko to at least go out and find Shiki, and so we head out in her car. With Broad Bridge being the largest construction project that the Asagami's are involved in, and with plenty of places to hide, we conclude that it's the likeliest location for Fujino to seek refuge, and the likeliest place for Shiki to be. Miss Tōko runs red light after red light in her off-road buggy, and when we near the bay shoreline the bridge comes into view, looking like a giant squeezed and twisted it with his hand.

Nearing the front entrance, we're stopped by a security guard. Miss Tōko starts to argue with him while Shiki, with bloodstained left arm, emerges from the corridor behind the guard. Wordlessly assessing the situation in a glance, she braces and delivers a running tackle to the guard, dealing him a particularly nasty blow to the head. He is knocked out instantly, a victim of Shiki's particular style of negotiation. She greets us.

"Yo. Somehow, I thought you'd be here," Shiki says. Her face is pale, whether from the cold rain or the blood loss, I couldn't say. I had a mountain of things to say to her regarding this whole ridiculous hunt, but when I see her at the brink of collapsing, I'm at a loss for words. I try to extend a hand to support her, but she swats it away with her own.

"Might as well have finished it with one hand tied behind your back, I see," says Miss Tōko, surprised. Shiki grants her a glare of dissatisfaction.

"Tōko, that girl had a last surprise. She developed some sort of remote viewing spell in the end. That and her other power makes for a dangerous combination if left alone."

"Remote viewing? Like scrying or clairvoyance? That is bad. She'd be able to hit you with a spell even if you were hiding behind cover. Wait—'if left alone'?"

Shiki sighs. "Well, her pain insensitivity switched back on at the last moment. Fucking unbelievable. Without pain, she just denied me the pleasure of seeing her suffering face. So I said to myself, 'what the hell, why don't I just kill her disease while I'm here'. So I saw the lines on her disease, cut 'em, and here we are. If you hurry and get a hospital on the line, she still might make it."

At first I thought I didn't hear correctly, but the only thing I understand is that Shiki didn't kill Fujino Asagami. I immediately pull out my cell phone and dial the number of Fujino's doctor that Miss Tōko gave me, just to make absolutely sure they'll send out an ambulance. I'm not entirely sure they could make it in this storm, but if it comes to that, I'd take Fujino to

a hospital myself. Luckily, her doctor happily replies that he'll come immediately, saying that he'd been worried about the missing Fujino. He might have even been crying while talking to me. I'm glad to know she has at least one person on her side in this world.

Oblivious to my joy, Miss Tōko and Shiki are having another one of their odd conversations behind me.

"Nice job stemming the bleeding with your sleeve," says Miss Tōko, admiring Shiki's handiwork.

"Yeah, and since it can't be fixed anymore, I killed it too for good measure. Figured since you were a puppet maker mage, you'd be able to make an artificial arm."

"No problem, but that's coming out of your paycheck. I always thought you looked a bit too normal compared to your Arcane Eyes of Death Perception. As an added bonus, I'll even imbue it with the ability to touch ghosts and other things in that state of being."

I wish they'd stop talking about all that occult stuff. Gives me the creeps. "They said they're sending an ambulance. It'll be a lot of trouble if we stay here, so do you wanna go?"

"With pleasure," Miss Tōko replies, shivering in the rain. Shiki remains silent. I'm hoping the reason for that is that she wants to see Fujino Asagami off properly.

"I'll have to stay here, since I'm the one that contacted them and have to give them a situation report. Both of you can probably go."

"In this miserable rain? You're a strange one, aren't you, Kokutō?" Miss Tōko gestures for Shiki to follow her. "Shiki, let's scram."

"I'll pass, thanks." Shiki replies, which promptly has Miss Tōko smiling mischievously at us all the way back to her buggy.

"Shiki, make sure not to kill Kokutō just because you couldn't take a shot at Fujino, all right?" She starts the car, and though I can't hear her from here, I see her laughing even as she backs it up and drives away. In the shade of a nearby building, me and Shiki seek shelter from the summer rain, and before long, the ambulance arrives.

We watch as the EMTs load Fujino into the ambulance. From our distance, I can't get a good look at Fujino, so I can't confirm whether or not she's the same girl I met on the night of the 20th, as I've been suspecting. Somehow, I think it's for the best.

Shiki, wet and cold from the rain, has her empty eyes fixed intently on Fujino Asagami. The night is slowly shifting into dawn, and while listening

to the sound of the rain, I air a question.

“Still can’t forgive her, right?”

“She’s dead to me. Got no business with the dead,” says Shiki frankly, but without malice. So she’s decided she no longer cares. That might actually be the best possible result for both their sakes. Shiki throws her glance in my direction. “And you? You’re the one that keeps saying that murder is bad no matter what the reason, right?” It almost seems as if the question is directed as much to herself as to me.

“Yeah, but I sympathize with her. To be honest, I’m not feeling anything towards the corner boys Fujino killed.”

“Well, isn’t that surprising. I was hoping I could hear the dulcet tones of your familiar generalizations.” I don’t know if Shiki wants me to be angry at her or not, but it doesn’t matter. She didn’t kill anyone. I close my eyes and try to listen to the sound of the raindrops falling.

“Well, take it or leave it. I still think that, despite her losing her way, she’s still a normal girl. When she looks back on this, she won’t be selective about what she chooses to remember. She’ll remember what she did, warts and all. And even if she does give herself up, the case is absurd. No one can prove she could have done the murders, and she won’t be punished by society. But that’s what’ll make it so difficult for her.”

“How so?”

“Because I think sins are things people individually carry, a burden that we ourselves make for our own fair share. Our sins become heavier the better our wisdom and common sense, and the greater our happiness. The same goes for Fujino Asagami.”

“Man, *this* is why we call you a big softy. So you’re saying a man without wisdom and compassion doesn’t know the weight of sin?”

“I suppose. But see, there isn’t a person in the world that doesn’t know the weight of a sin. Maybe some people to whom the weight of sin is light instead of overbearing, but the weight is felt all the same, a small sin in the scope of their similarly small compassion, but enough to plant the doubt in him. And soon enough, that doubt grows into something they regret. Though the size differs for each person, each sin carries the same purpose.”

Even for Keita Minato, whose fear of his own sins almost drove him to madness. He has fear and anger, but also regret and guilt. He might never be able to atone, but he can try, at the very least. “It certainly seems easier to not be blamed by society for your own sins, but if no one will judge you, then you carry it yourself. The memories never let the seed go away. You yourself believe that the soul doesn’t exist, Shiki. Guess that means that you can’t heal the wounds in it either.” I conclude with a smile. “And if no

one forgives you, you can't even begin to forgive yourself. The wound in your soul only keeps growing, never healing, like Fujino's lingering pain."

In a rare show of contemplative demeanor, Shiki remains silent and actually listens. Without prior warning, she steps out of the shade of the building roof and lets herself be washed over by the rain. "Alright, Mikiya the Poet. You say there are no truly bad people, since compassion and wisdom always makes them remember their sins. But what about me, who, need I remind you, isn't particularly compassionate or wise. Can you let a person like me run free?"

"Well, there's no curing stupidity. Guess I'll have to carry your sins in your place," I say earnestly. Shiki glances at me blankly, looking very much surprised before casting her eyes downwards.

"Now I remember. You always used to joke with a straight face back in the day. I swear, *Shiki* was terribly annoyed at that."

"Well, I think I can carry the sins of at least one girl with me," I argue. In a rare show of humor, Shiki chuckles.

"I'll tell you one more thing," she adds. "I might have burdened myself with a sin today. But in return, I found out how I wanted to live, and what I want. It's vague and fragile, but for now, it's all I got. And it turns out it's not as bad as I thought it would be, and that makes me just a little happy. It's a little, teensy, weensy bit...of homicidal intent that's leaning in your direction."

That last sentence makes me grimace a little, and yet Shiki still looks beautiful smiling under the rain. The storm is already subsiding, and by morning it will all probably be over. Me and Shiki spend just a few more precious moments there alone, Shiki, smiling, letting the summer rain wash over her like a salve of forgiveness, and me just looking at her.

It is the first real smile she showed me since she woke up less than a month ago.